

Time, Tense and Aspect in Nonstandard English: An Overview

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1. Introduction

As nearly any advanced student of English will notice, that which can be covered under the headings of ‘tense’ and ‘aspect’ will vary greatly from grammar to grammar depending on variables such as the type of grammar chosen, the preferences of the author, the framework of the work and the age of the text. For example, in some grammars of English, tense is a fairly inclusive term and can encompass various combinations of tense, aspect and modality, consequently including categories of ‘perfect’ tenses, ‘future’ tenses and even a ‘future anterior’ tense in English. For others, especially more modern approaches to grammar, tense is used far more restrictively to cover only those instances in which a verb inflection is used to convey a temporal location on a perceived timeline – in such a stringent approach, English is reduced to only two tenses: ‘past’ and ‘present’ (sometimes alternatively referred to as ‘non-past’).

Moreover, when reviewing a large sample of English grammars, one cannot help but notice the seemingly gratuitous differences in terminological conventions. Sometimes the same phenomena are assigned different labels by different grammarians (e.g. the past tense may also be referred to as ‘the imperfect’ or ‘preterit’) and sometimes the same term will be used to cover different concepts; for instance, in many grammars the phrase ‘simple tense’ is used to mean ‘non-progressive’, while in others this same expression is used to refer to a predicator consisting of a single verb, and thus ‘simple tense’ contrasts with ‘compound tense’, i.e. a predicator consisting of a combination of aspectual auxiliaries plus a main verb.

Alongside this confusing array of perspectives and nomenclature, most reference grammars (perhaps for reasons of simplicity, pragmatism or pedagogy, perhaps as a reflection of ideological or prescriptive intentions), emphasize the conventionalized patterns of usage as they are evidenced in so-called Standard English (SE). However expedient this may be, it can give the impression of English as more rigid and monolithic than it actually is and also excludes (and

through this exclusion implicitly devalues) the everyday dialects of many native speakers.¹

2. Notes on Time, Tense and Aspect

Needless to say, the question of how to best define the concept of time as human experience is philosophical question, not a linguistic one, and as such it is well beyond the scope of the present study. For the present purposes, any commonsensical or standard dictionary definition will suffice, e.g. *time* is “that part of existence which is measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, etc., or this process considered as a whole” (*Cambridge dictionaries online*) or, from *Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary*, *time* is “[a] duration or relation of events expressed in terms of past, present, and future, and measured in units such as minutes, hours, days, months, or years”.

Tense, on the other hand, refers to the grammatical means through which speakers conceptualize and encode time (i.e. contrasts between temporal references along a timeline). This type of definition, which is typical of the modern descriptive approach to grammar, is usually understood to mean that the term *tense* is only correctly applied when it covers the grammatical encoding of time relations by means of inflectional suffixes on the verb rather than through the use of auxiliaries or other elements in the utterance. As suggested above, given this type of more narrow definition, English has only two ‘true’ (i.e. inflectional) tenses, past, as in *she walked to work*, and present (or ‘non-past’), as in *she walks to work*.

Clearly, there is no one-to-one correspondence between *time* and the grammatical realization of temporal relations. This is usually illustrated in reference grammars with examples like the following:

- (1) a. The train leaves at midnight. (present tense, reference to future time)
- b. I just wanted to ask if I could borrow some cash. (past tense, reference to present time)

Example (1a) shows the so-called ‘timetable’ present, i.e. the use of the present tense to refer to future time for actions that are fixed or planned and are not likely to change (e.g. schedules, itineraries, instructions, etc.). According to Comrie (1985:19), a sentence like (1b) is probably not an expression of the speaker’s

¹ The author is well aware that comprehensive grammars such as Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002) generally attempt, to the extent that it is practical, to give some common or well-known informal and nonstandard uses alongside the perceived standard.

desires in the past, but is more likely a polite way to communicate a present desire to borrow money.

Aspect, in contrast to tense, is not so much about a temporal *when* expressed in the verb phrase, but rather a temporal *how*. A concise way to express that relationship would be that “[a]spect can be said to describe the *texture* of the time in which a situation occurs, such as a single point of time, a continuous range of time, a sequence of discrete points in time, etc., whereas tense indicates its location in time in terms of past, present and future” (*Grammatical Aspect* in *The Wikipedia* [online], my emphasis). So, for example, both the sentences *I ate my lunch* and *I was eating my lunch*, express past tense (through the inflected verbs *ate* and *was*), but the latter sentence also perspectivizes the situation as being ongoing. English, then, has two aspects, progressive (2a) and perfect (2b), which may also be combined, as in (2c):

- (2) a. I am/was eating my lunch.
b. I have/had eaten my lunch.
c. I have/had been eating my lunch ...

As the examples in (2) also show, aspect always includes tense, i.e. the aspectual auxiliaries *be* and *have* are inflected so that (2a) illustrates the present and past progressive respectively, (2b) shows the present and past perfect forms while (2c) gives an example of the present/past perfect progressive.

Though I believe the more academically precise uses of the terms tense and aspect presented in the rough sketch above are useful and justified, in the context of this brief paper, I employ a looser sense of these notions and consider rather the various means by which Standard and Nonstandard English dialects express the same temporal reference, aspectual texture or combination of the two. Considering the aims of the present work, a strict adherence to technical intricacies, no matter how well motivated these may be, would be counterproductive and result in needless terminological complications in the light of the matter at hand.

3. Notes on Nonstandard English

The problems of defining terms like ‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard dialect’ are well noted in the literature (see, for example, Bex *et al.* 1999, Crowley 2003 and Battistella 2005); in the succinct words of Parker and Riley (2009:148), “[i]t is no simple matter to define the difference between a standard and a nonstandard variety of language”. In this context, the authors astutely go on to note that “[i]t

is important to understand that identifying a dialect as standard or nonstandard is a sociological judgment, not a linguistic one” (Parker & Riley 2009:149).

Questions of style, register and medium can also confuse the issue, i.e. one can speak of ‘informal’ Standard English or standard ‘spoken’ English (cf. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006:9–17), which many speakers may mistakenly view as nonstandard. Again, considering the limited scope of the present study, it is not necessary, desirable or practical to present a custom-made definition of SE or Nonstandard English (NSE), but rather I take as a starting point a commonsense definition of SE as the (officially or unofficially) recognized prestige dialect used primarily in written language and formal speech situations. It is typically the variant which has been codified in school grammars, usage books, dictionaries and other reference works and perpetuated in schools and other formal institutions as the norm to which language learners should aspire.² NSE can then be defined in opposition to SE; broadly speaking, Nonstandard English is any dialect (e.g. regional, social, ethnic) that differs from Standard English.

It is also especially important to note that ‘nonstandardness’ is a scalar and quantitative notion, i.e. nonstandard forms are not necessarily absent from standard dialects, they may simply be much less frequent; similarly, most speakers are not pure speakers of either SE or NSE, but rather will make use of a range of standard and nonstandard forms, varying in the degree into which one variant is preferred over another and switching appropriately for contextual, stylistic or sociolinguistic reasons.

4. Why Examine Nonstandard English?

There are many scholastically well-grounded and self-evident reasons to study Nonstandard English, for example, examining NSE is important in describing geographical and social difference in language use, examining cultural and social heritages as well as being an important factor in analyzing historical developments.³

Another, perhaps less obvious reason is the special prominence of NSE in Popular Culture (within the concept of which one could reasonably include current internet-based trends like blogging, chatting and social networking), and the

² Having said that, I wish to emphasize that I do not view SE as a linguistically superior, more correct or more logical form of English. Its prestige status is the result of social, historical and economic factors and is not due to any inherent superiority.

³ See Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1998:16ff.) for more discussion on the importance of dialect study.

subsequent wider audience for NSE variations (see also Trotta 2010). The connection between NSE and Popular Culture is significant for a number of reasons; first is the matter of representation. The use of Nonstandard English dialects as a literary device is discussed to a great extent in Taavitsainen *et al.* (1999:113), who remark in their introduction that “[i]n fiction nonstandard forms are mostly found in dialogues and they are used as a powerful tool to reveal character traits or social and regional differences”. The relevance of examining the various representations of nonstandard dialects in Popular Culture is also duly noted by Fraley (2009:1) who writes that “[p]opular media representations, serving as sites of contestation regarding the social construction of race, play a key role in shaping, communicating, and understanding racial identities”. Highly noteworthy in this context is Green’s (2002) textbook *African American English* in which she devotes two whole chapters to the use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in literature and the media (Green 2002:164–215), presenting the considerable research on this topic along with discussions and comments on the various intentions behind fictional/artistic representations of AAVE.

A second reason is that Standard English is by nature conservative and resistant to change, whereas Nonstandard English is less so and thus a potential vehicle for the introduction (or reintroduction) of (new) linguistic phenomena. Such phenomena can quickly become part of the cultural landscape and collective consciousness of speakers via Popular Culture. By this, I do not mean to say that NSE usages are necessarily assimilated unquestioningly and used indiscriminately, but rather that they enter our awareness, not to mention dictionaries and usage books, which are under ever-increasing pressure to reflect up-to-date uses and current trends. Some recent lexico-grammatical theories (e.g. Hoey 2005) emphasize the fact that our knowledge of a word and its concomitant grammar are dependent on our experiences with it – thus oft-encountered nonstandard usage in Popular Culture contexts can ‘prime’⁴ speakers for variations that they would not otherwise come across.

Another reason to research NSE in connection to Popular Culture is because of the relevance of this combination in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning situations. According to Priesler (1999a&b), in EFL countries (like

⁴ In the sense of ‘priming’ used by Hoey (2005), i.e. when we acquire vocabulary, the items learned are loaded linguistic, social and general information which are called *primings*; these are tied to contexts and it can never be assumed that the priming that operates in one textual domain (e.g. medicine, the news) will operate in another textual domain (e.g. law, casual conversation).

Priesler's native Denmark), passive English language situations like watching TV, listening to music, using the internet, etc., are generally the most common form of contact with English. Much of the use of English in such countries is more related to the subcultural identity of the individual than the fact that it is a mandatory school subject or that English is presumed to have some intrinsic, superior value as a foreign language. In other words, the main driving force for using English in some EFL countries is that language's integral role as a lifestyle symbol and identity marker. In such cases, the English found in Popular Culture, which often reflects nonstandard use, is important and noteworthy since it constitutes the source for imitation by language learners.

5. Overview of Tense and Aspect: differences in SE and NSE uses

The following survey of tense and aspect in NSE is by no means intended as a comprehensive inventory of all the NSE variations as regards tense and aspect; it is rather a concise, introductory overview meant to give a sense of the types of variations and trends that can currently be witnessed in NSE dialects.⁵ Each NSE feature is presented under its own heading with examples and brief comments or notes on details of usage.

5.1 Blurring of Present Perfect and Simple Past Forms: *You done me wrong*

In some informal and nonstandard varieties of English, the simple past tense can occur in situations in which one might expect the present perfect, e.g. in a sentence like *Did you eat yet?* or *Did you ever see that film?*, the adverbials *yet* and *ever* suggest a past event with current relevance and thus it would seem more appropriate in the logic of SE to use *Have you eaten yet?/Have you ever seen that film?* Also, where SE might have the present perfect to show the recent past (as in *I see the light in his room, he's probably **just** arrived*), some dialects again would use the simple past (*Sorry, Bill's not in. He just went out*, Kortmann 2006:607). These differences in use are widely known and much discussed features that are said to distinguish British English from informal American English (see, for example, Hundt & Smith 2009).

Conversely, if an adverbial indicates a fixed moment in the past, one would expect in SE the simple past tense. However, some NSE dialects indicate this temporal relation with the present perfect, e.g. Kortmann gives the example

⁵ The main inspiration for this list is Kortmann's (2006) summary of syntactic variation in English from a global perspective, which I have rearranged and modified (and in some cases appended or deleted items) for the present purposes.

Some of us have been to New York years ago (2006:607), though he does not attribute it to any particular dialect.

Kortmann (2006:607–608) also notes that in some NSE dialects “a different tense form is used for at least some of the traditional functions of the Present Perfect (e.g. the Simple Present in Irish English (IrE) for the continuative perfect in *I know him since my schooldays*)”. Later in the same brief passage on this topic, Kortmann sums up the situation by saying “[t]he dominant pattern across varieties of English, including the standard varieties is the Simple Past (increasingly) doing service for all major uses of the Present Perfect apart from the continuative perfect” (Kortmann:2006:607).

In my own contact with nonstandard dialects in New York City (cf. Trotta 2003), I have noted that many speakers use the past participle forms with an unclear temporal/aspectual reference, e.g. *I done it already* or *I seen him before* (Rickford 1999:7 also notes this tendency). This use of a participle form without an accompanying auxiliary may be the result of a combination of factors like the muddled distinctions in tense covered above and/or the deletion of a contracted *have*.⁶

5.2 *Do* as a tense marker: *Wen ai did smaal*

In some NSE dialects, especially pidgins and creoles but also in the English Southwest, a ‘periphrastic’ *do* can function as an analytic tense marker (both present and past). For example, consider the use of the so-called ‘anterior *did*’ in sentences like:

- (3) a. *Wen ai did smaal tiN woz chiyp* (SE ‘When I was small, things were cheap’) (Panamanian Creole, from Craig 1991:189)
b. *im did win a tawzn dalaz in Kolown*. (SE ‘He had won a thousand dollars in Colón’ (Providencia Creole, from Holm 1988:469).

In such dialects, *did* can carry both past tense (3a) and past perfect aspect (3b) (see Kortmann 2004 for an extensive discussion periphrastic *do*; see Craig 1991 for an overview of different creoles that make use of *do* as a tense and aspect marker).

When it comes to the English Southwest, Kortmann (2006:608) further notes that unstressed *do(es)/did* is sometimes used to mark present and past tense in a way similar to that in (3), e.g. *This man what do own this* (SE ‘The man who

⁶ Unfortunately, *have* deletion is not covered specifically in the present investigation (see Sidnell 2002:3–4 for a note on this topic).

owns this’); *I thought you did mean a rubber* (SE ‘I thought you meant a rubber’). This periphrastic *do* has been the subject of much analysis and may be a remnant of Early Modern English, for more detailed analysis of this use of *do*, see Klemola (1996); Gachelin (1997:42) and Kortmann (2004).

5.3 Stressed (or ‘remote’) *been* and unstressed *been*

In AAVE, a stressed *been* precedes a verb and indicates that the state or action started or took place long time ago (cf. Rickford 1999:19ff.). According to Sidnell (2002:4) this feature is unique to AAVE, though Kortmann states that it exists in other varieties as well (Kortmann 2006:608).

- (4) a. James been dead.⁷
b. But, y’all been broke up, right?
c. Omar been gone.

Example (4a) means that the person in question (*James*) has been dead for many years. In example (4b) the speaker asks a question to confirm that a specific relationship ended a long time ago – in Standard English it could be expressed as ‘but you two broke up a long time ago, right?’. Similarly, in (4c) the speaker packages the message in a way to convey that the subject (*Omar*) has been gone for a long time.

According to Rickford (1999:6 & 23–27) and (Green 2002:59), the use of stressed (remote) *been* is mutually exclusive with an adverbial of time and thus saying something along the lines of *He been working since he was a kid* would indicate an unstressed *been*, i.e. a straightforward use of *been* (with *have* deletion) to indicate the perfect aspect and not remoteness.

5.4 Reduction of *have* after aux.: *shoulda, coulda, woulda* + past tense forms

The reduction of contracted *have* (‘ve) with certain auxiliaries such as *would, should, could* as in *We shoulda left sooner, They coulda done better* or *I woulda liked that* may seem more properly a phonological phenomenon than a grammatical one. This may well be the case when the aux + /ə/ sequence is followed by a past participle form of the verb, e.g. *I shoulda known better, or You woulda seen it if you looked*. However, past participle forms and past tense forms often coincide, obscuring the distinction between the two (see also section 5.4). For some

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all AAVE examples in the present work are attested, though they come from scripted speech found in the TV series *The Wire*, see Trotta & Blyahher (2011) for details.

speakers, the option to use a clearly past tense form is fully natural, as the following examples (all gleaned from the internet) illustrate:

- (5) a. I knew I shoulda took a nap.
b. I coulda wrote more but who wants to read that.
c. ...people dont wanna fight me. if they did they woulda did it by now!

Such uses could, speculatively speaking, be signaling a shift in perceptions of the strings *could've*, *should've*, *would've* as single verbs rather than multi-word phrases. Krug (2001:211) notes forms like *woulda*, *coulda*, *shoulda* as belonging to the same paradigm of ‘univerbation’ as other complex verb phrases such as *want to*, rendered as *wanna*, and *have got to*, rendered as *gotta*, though there is no further discussion in that work of forms like those in (5) as examples of a new grammaticalization process in English.

It is not uncommon for people to comment that examples like those above are simply due to sloppiness and ignorance of the rules (cf. Pinker 2000:78). However, this type of process is well known and has precedents that appear strikingly similar. For example, the conditional forms in Romance languages are derived from Latin infinitives followed by the verb *habēre* (‘to have’ in the sense of ‘own’ or ‘possess’).⁸ The fixing of word order (infinitive + auxiliary) and the phonological reduction of the inflected forms of *habēre* eventually led to the fusion of the two elements into a single synthetic form, e.g. Latin. *cantāre habuit* > **cantare ebbe* > Italian *canterebbe* (see Hopper & Traugott 2003:53 & 62ff. for further discussion).⁹

5.5 Future indicators: *gonna*, *I'ma*, *finna* and *be*

Gonna with a preceding auxiliary *be* (e.g. *I'm gonna do it later*) is a fairly unexceptional and prevalent feature of informal spoken English and therefore only marginally interesting in the present context. However, combined with copula deletion (cf. Sidnell 2002:7, see also section 5.9 below) as in *He gonna get hurt no matter what you or me do* or *Who ya gonna call?* the use of *gonna* becomes more noteworthy and fits more cleanly under the rubric of ‘nonstandard’. A further contraction of the construction, but this time with an explicit marker of the

⁸ Though both the Latin and English examples involve verbs meaning ‘have’, the analogy is in terms of form, not meaning.

⁹ I would like to thank Antoaneta Granberg, University of Gothenburg, for pointing out this interesting parallel to me.

first person singular *am* can be noted in the phrase *I'ma*, as seen in the examples below:

- (6) a. I'ma get dressed.
- b. Keep on with that shit an' I'ma leave your ass in Baltimore.
- c. Y'know I'ma be home soon enough, right?

According to Green 2002:196, this phenomenon is not well studied. However, one could speculate that since AAVE is resistant to deletion of *be* if it were to be expressed by the first person singular *am*, this construction may be a way of compensating for a gap in the system when the speaker wants/needs to include the first person pronoun *I* in the utterance. Naturally, other options are available like *gonna leave in a few minutes* (a subjectless construction), *I'm gonna leave in a few minutes* or *I am going to leave in a few minutes*, but these are either variants of informal English or, as in the case of the last example, Standard English.

Finna is a future maker that is exclusive to AAVE though it is believed to be a contraction of *fixing+to* which is a feature of Southern White Vernacular English (cf. Bernstein 2003:114–118). *Finna* supposedly indicates that the event will take place in the immediate future and, like a modal, “it precedes non-finite verbs which are not marked for tense and agreement” (Green 2002:70):

- (7) a. We finna get back old times.
- b. You finna go hit a state senator?

As a final point in this section on future reference, consider the use of *be* as a future marker in (8), which is superficially similar to the ever-present invariant *be* (see section 5.9 below):

- (8) a. You see we a little short now, but tomorrow, I be right back here with the four.
- b. Now, look, I be down later sometime.
- c. You ain't even gonna be serving no more. Your ass be out on the bottom end of Vine street ... sucking on a 40, yelling “5–0”. You hear me?

In a small note on the matter, Rickford (1999:5–6) mentions that this is probably due to the dropping of a contracted *'ll* (see also Fasold and Wolfram 1974:51–53).

5.6 Completive/perfective *done*: *The game done changed*

According to Labov (1998:124) “AAVE has always possessed the perfect particle, *done*, which is found both in white Southern states English and in Caribbean creoles. In AAVE, *done* precedes a verb that makes reference to an action completed in the recent past”.

- (9) a. ... we done gone so far from Baltimore.
b. ... it don't make sense to ace this motherfucker after he done testified.
c. Game done changed.

It is clear, however, from other work on the subject that *done* (unstressed) simply indicates completion and, though it is likely that this completeness is recent, it is not necessarily recent (see, for example, Smitherman 1986:24, Rickford 1999:6 and Green 2002:60–63). In examples (9a–c), the construction is used where one could expect *has/have* or possibly *has just* in the case of (9b).

5.7 *Be* as a perfect auxiliary: *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*

According to Kortmann (2006:608) “[s]ome varieties, notably Irish English, have retained the older Germanic pattern of a *be*-perfect (e.g. *They're not left school yet*) along with the *have*-perfect, the former being used with verbs of motion like *come, go, change, improve, die*”. Studies in this field (e.g. Hickey 2007, Filppula 1999, among others) have indicated that this construction in Irish English most likely derives from an early Modern English origin, a speculation based on the high frequency of the construction during that period. The question of why the *be*-perfect should be retained in Irish English rather than other dialects is unclear and may, according to some research, be due to some substratal reinforcement from Irish (cf. Filppula 1999).

5.8 A wider range of uses of the Progressive: *i'm lovin' it!*

Because the progressive aspect is primarily used to show duration or ‘ongoingness’, verbs denoting states are typically incompatible with the construction. However, in many informal or nonstandard British and American dialects, unambiguously stative verbs (or rather typically stative verbs used in a clearly stative sense) can be found in the progressive form:

- (10) a. i'm lovin' it. (McDonald's restaurant advertising campaign, started in 2003)
b. So what are you wanting from me? (Kortmann 2006:607)
c. You're liking it too (from Gerry and the Pacemakers *I like it*)

Uses like those above in (10) are occasionally noted in the reference grammars with the explanation that the progressive is sometimes used to indicate a temporary state (e.g. *Now you are being silly, Am I hearing what I think I'm hearing?*) with “the implication of a type of behavior or stance” (cf. Downing & Locke 2006:373). Despite such stipulations, the general characterization of the progressive as applying to a category of dynamic verbs has been challenged by some (e.g. Scheffer 1975, Kakietek 1997 and Smiecinska 2003). Kakietek (1997:85), for example goes as far as to say “the overwhelming majority of statives when used under appropriate circumstances are quite free to take the Progressive and cannot be viewed as constituting a separate syntactic category”.

The nebulous nature of the nonstandard label becomes apparent when one looks more closely at such phenomena. Considering the research on the subject and the frequent notes in reference grammars on the typical situations in which the ban on the use of the progressive with stative verbs is weakened, the question is how one can determine the nonstandard status of any particular occurrence of the construction; exactly how nonstandard any particular use can be considered would depend on case-by-case factors such as context, who is making the judgment and the particular verb in question (i.e. how frequent is the verb, does the verb have dynamic meanings alongside stative ones which may facilitate a use with the progressive, is the verb semantically similar in some way with other verbs that occur freely in the construction, etc.).

As an additional observation on this point, it is worth noting that progressive forms are commonly extended to stative verbs in several varieties of World Englishes as in *She is knowing her science very well* (East African English) and *Mohan is having two houses* (Indian English) (cf. Jenkins 2003:26).

5.9 Copular deletion in the progressive: *They thinkin' short...*

One of the most recognizable features of AAVE is the deletion of the copular verb *be*:

- (11) a. Your money good, right?
b. He deader than Tupac today.
c. They big, they fat, and they gorgeous.

Though examples like those in (11), in which the (absent) copular verb simply links a subject to a subject complement, are not relevant for the discussion at hand, studies on copular deletion in AAVE typically include the deletion of the progressive auxiliary *be* as part of the same phenomenon (e.g. Green 2002:38,

47–54; Rickford 1999:61–89, see also Bender 2001:49–50 for a discussion of this matter), as in the following:

- (12) a. Hurry up [...] people looking.
b. Oh, they thinkin' short when they should be thinkin' long.

The omission of the copular is not a completely straightforward matter; there is considerable agreement that copular deletion in AAVE can occur when it would correspond to *is* or *are* in Standard English and then only in environments in which contraction would be possible in SE (see for example Labov 1969; Rickford 1999:62 and Sidnell 2002:11, but see also Bender 2000:77–95 for counter-arguments). Expressed another way, this means that copula deletion in AAVE does not occur with the first person singular (*I'm here*), non-finite forms (like those following a modal, *They can be here by noon*) or past tense forms (*She was/They were here this morning*). In addition, certain grammatical environments (e.g. whether the preceding subject is a pronoun or not and what type of element follows the (deleted) copula (see Baugh 1980, Rickford 1999:61–89) as well as phonological conditions (e.g. avoidance of consonant clusters or a vowel + vowel combination), see Labov 1972:106, Sidnell 2002:13–14) are said to favor or disfavor deletion.

5.10 *Be + sit/stood* with progressive meaning: *I am stood in a very big shadow*

The use of participles of *sat/stood* in examples like *When you are stood there, you can see the flames* (Kortmann 2006:608) and *She was sat there* (Graddol *et al.* 1996:235) is often cited as nonstandard, though their exact status in British English is not completely clear. As Miller and Weinart (2009:449–450) point out, similar uses can be documented from the 1930s, e.g. *I thought of having some of our plants stood along there in front of Abbot Thomas, with some tall vases among them ...* from *The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy Sayers (1934), cited in Miller & Weinart (2009:450). The authors also cite varying views on the status of the construction; for example, Carter and McCarthy (1997:37) call it Yorkshire and not Standard British English, Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle claim that it is characteristic of “general non-standard or semi-standard variety of English” while Trask (2001:252 & 273) apparently labels the string as “colloquial British English” or “regional British English”. Miller and Weinart refer to this usage to support their assertion that many so-called nonstandard uses may simply be misclassified – they may in fact be informal spoken uses that have made their way into writing (see also Denison 1998:95).

5.11 Habitual Marking in NSE: *Sometimes it be that way*

As a starting point, consider the following examples from Kortmann (2006:607):

- (13) a. He be sick. (AAVE)
b. He be's at home. (IrE)
c. There does be a meeting of the company every Tuesday. (IrE)
d. He does catch fish pretty. (Creole)

In the literature on AAVE, the example in (13a) is typically called 'invariant *be*' and refers to the universal usage of the copula verb (*be*) in AAVE with first, second, and third person. This form often indicates habituality or a permanent state, as in example (14):

- (14) a. Shit, half the neighborhood be up here week before check day.
b. The pawns, man, in the game ... they get capped quick. They be out of the game early.
c. Money be green.
d. You be asking for me?

Examples (14a–b) show invariant *be* used in a phrase to express an action that happens regularly or often; in (14c) it refers to a permanent state. In addition, sometimes, invariant *be* indicates repetition, as in example (14d).

The fact that the varying dialects in examples (13) can express habituality with forms of either *be* or *do* may not be a coincidence since both words (usually in combination) were used in early Modern English to indicate a habitual perspective on the action expressed by the verb.

In Hickey's (2007:216–279) examination of this subject in Irish English (like that shown in examples 13b&c), both the *do* and *be* habitual forms (e.g. *He do(es) be working*) are discussed at great length. As far as the inflected *be* forms (*be's* or *bees*) without *do* are concerned, Hickey states that it is primarily a northern Irish phenomenon which may or may not have been derived from Scots English through Ulster Scots. Though previous research has speculated on the connection between Ulster Scots and both IrE and AAVE, Hickey is not convinced of that connection in the case of AAVE, but rather considers the possibility that it developed this use independently based on patterns from early modern English (cf. Hickey 2007:230).

Green (2002:53–54) notes the similarities and differences between nonstandard habitual markers in IrE, AAVE and 'Carolina' English (a variant of Southern White Vernacular English spoken in the Carolinas), e.g. *Sometimes I have*

spells. Lately I be having more spells (Montgomery and Mishoe 1999:247, in Green 2002:53), though she does not speculate as to the exact nature of the relationship between them.

5.13 Subject-Verb Agreement: *The devil haves us in a state of sin*

Nonstandard subject-verb agreement is a typical aspect of most NSE dialects (e.g. *The king stay the king, That boy want Omar Bad*). Arguably, subject-verb agreement is not primarily a tense marker but rather it indicates non-temporal grammatical relations such as person and number. However, some NSE variants, especially AAVE can make use of a seemingly redundant *-s* suffix to indicate habituality. On this topic, Green (2002:100) states that “verbs may be marked with a verbal *-s*, which may have a number of different functions: third person singular agreement marker, narrative present marker and habitual marker” (for further discussion of *-s* as a narrative marker, see also Labov 1987 and Butters 1989:78–84). For example, in a sentence like *I robs drug dealers*, the speaker may be emphasizing habituality.

Green (2002:100–101) notes that even the verbs like *have* and *be* can sometimes take a ‘habitual’ *-s* ending in AAVE, e.g. *The devil haves us in a state of sin*, and *Sometimes it bes that way*. The latter example bears a striking resemblance to a similar use in Irish English (see (13b) above).

6. Discussion and final remarks

As mentioned previously, this overview of NSE variations is necessarily lacking in coverage and depth. Among other things, the above inventory does not include many features of the ‘new’ Englishes in the so-called ‘outer circle’¹⁰ (i.e. countries and territories where English is not the native tongue, but where English is important for historical reasons and plays a significant role in education, governance, and popular culture, see Kachru 1985).

All shortcomings notwithstanding, the snapshot of tense and aspect in Non-standard English in this study highlights a number of important points:

- All of the above examples reaffirm that NSE dialects are simply variants of the same language, albeit ones that, for whatever cultural or historical reasons, reflect different options as to how one can express tense and aspect. In this

¹⁰ The labels *Inner*, *Outer*, and *Expanding Circles* represent the spread, acquisition, and functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts. The ‘outer circle’ includes, among others, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore and South Africa (cf. Kachru 1985).

context, nonstandard dialects can provide important information about historical processes and the dynamics of language change; many of the phenomena discussed above are not ‘new’ forms produced by speakers who are ignorant of correct grammar, but rather reflect uses and trends found in earlier stages of English.

- Studying Nonstandard English forces us to reassess what the label ‘nonstandard’ actually denotes. In several of the examples in section 5, the distinction between informal and nonstandard is especially difficult to establish. To quote Miller and Weinart (who are paraphrasing comments by James and Leslie Milroy) “...there is far more variation in *standard* English than the arbiters of usage imagine” (2009:450)
- For many years, the Chomskyan model of syntactic inquiry has relied on acceptability judgments, which subsequently help define the notion of grammaticality, based on the intuitions of ‘competent’ native speakers. Nonstandard dialects challenge us to rethink such notions – what exactly constitutes a competent native speaker and how does competence apply to speakers of nonstandard dialects?
- Finally, in our present day ‘global village’ in which we can potentially come into contact with any number of unfamiliar or Nonstandard English varieties via TV, Film, radio, the internet, combined with our ever-increasing ability to communicate through new technology, it is crucial to examine the connections between Nonstandard English, Popular Culture and the ways in which this combination is mediated on a global scale.

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