DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 412 FL 018 490

AUTHOR Poplack, Shana; Tagliamonte, Sali
TITLE There's No Tense Like the Present: Verbal -s Inflection in Early Black English.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 42p.; In: York Papers in Linguistics 13. Selected papers from the Sociolinguistics Symposium; see FL 018 472.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Comparative Analysis; Diachronic Linguistics; *English; Foreign Countries; Language Research; Linguistic Theory; Phonology; *Tenses (Grammar); *Verbs
IDENTIFIERS Dominican Republic

ABSTRACT

The behavior of verbal "-s" is examined in two data sets on early Black English as represented by: (1) tape-recorded interviews with native English-speaking residents of a region of the Dominican Republic; and (2) the ex-slave recordings housed in the Library of Congress. Each verbal construction with the potential for variable "-s" marking was extracted. The phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discourse factors affecting occurrence were analyzed. Results suggest that a number of factors condition the occurrence of "-s," while other reported effects appear not to be operative at all. It is concluded that the verbal "-s" formed an integral part of early Black English grammar, and does not occur as a hypercorrect intrusion. The process was variable, not random, and may have reflected synchronic variability in the input language at the time of acquisition. A 68-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

Paper presented at the Sociolinguistics Symposium (7th, York, England, April 14-16, 1988).

There's no tense like the present: Verbal -*s* inflection in early Black English*

Shana Poplack
Sali Tagliamonte

University of Ottawa

1.0. Introduction

The verbal paradigm has frequently been used in crosslinguistic comparison to explore underlying grammatical relationships between dialects. Vernacular Black English (VBE) has perhaps received the most attention in this regard, particularly as part of an ongoing program to establish whether its synchronic form has developed from a prior creole or from Standard American English (SAE).

Thus in two of the most widely studied areas of the verb system, past-tense expression and copula usage, investigators have shown, through comparison with varieties of White English (and in some cases English-based creoles), that the underlying systems of VBE and SAE are similar in featuring the (same) copula and past-tense markers, though some of their surface manifestations are variably removed from VBE by the application of phonological and grammatical rules which can themselves be viewed as extensions of those operative in SAE (Labov et al. 1968, Labov 1969, Wolfram 1969, 1974; Fasold 1971, 1972; Pfaff 1971, Baugh 1980, Poplack and Sankoff 1987, Tagliamonte & Poplack, in press). The extent to which the results of these independent studies replicated each other was striking; they were in large part responsible for Labov's observation (1982:178-9) that "by 1979, the field ... had reached a consensus about the nature and origin of Black English".

In the area of verbal concord, however, very different and controversial interpretations obtain. In Standard English the present tense is not inflected morphologically, except on verbs with third person singular subjects. These categorically receive the affix -*s*, traditionally referred to as the verbal agreement or number concord marker. Earlier studies of VBE -*s* inflection, including several of those cited above, found that in contrast to Standard English, -*s* occurred variably not only on third singular verbs, but on verbs of other persons as well. Though the category of present tense was not explicitly rejected as part of the VBE grammar, it was considered not to require overt inflectional marking in the dialect (e.g. Fasold 1972:122). Cases of 3rd p. sg. -*s* deletion could thus be analyzed as regularization of a Standard English present-tense paradigm containing a redundant marker. However, the sporadic appearance of -*s* elsewhere raised the question of the function of this vagrant morpheme. As will be detailed below, two decades of research have not led to a consensus on the nature, let alone existence, of such a function, nor of its origin

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as an incompletely acquired Standard English present-tense marker or as a remnant from an earlier plantation creole. Most speculations on the origin of the form have been based on inferences from synchronic variation, though there have been some studies of historical texts (Schneider 1983; Brewer 1986, Pitts 1981, 1986). In this paper we propose to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon by systematically examining the behaviour of verbal *-s* in two data sets on early Black English as represented by tape-recorded interviews with 1) English-speaking residents of the peninsula of Samaná (Dominican Republic) and 2) the Ex-Slave Recordings housed in the Library of Congress. In so doing, we will be led to draw comparisons where possible with other dialects of Black and White English (both British and American) which show parallel variability, as well as with known facts from the history of the language. Though our early Black English data in (1) show the same apparently irregular distribution of *-s* attested in previous studies of contemporary VBE, featuring variable occurrence of verbal *-s* with subjects of all persons and numbers (1a)[1] even in the speech of the same individual, as well as on non-finite verbs and invariant *be* (1b), our analyses suggest that its conditioning is more consistent with what (little) is known about the behaviour of this marker in (early and modern) White English than with English-based creoles or contemporary VBE. This will corroborate our earlier independent findings on the grammar of Samaná English (Poplack and Sankoff 1987, Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press).

(1a) SINGULAR:

1st p. When I *pray*, I *pray* for everybody who's in danger. (03/1276)[2]
I *prays* for the people. (03/1247)

I *says* "why?" "Oh," he *says*, "it make too much noise". I *say*, "well does the Bible say make a noise over Jesus?" (ESR/FH/449-450)

2nd p. You *know* her, yes. (14/175)
You *knows* one. (14/269)

3rd p. And sometimes she *go* in the evening and *come* up in the morning. (05/232)
She *goes* to town every morning and *comes* up in the evening. (05/231)

PLURAL:

1st p. We *parch* it. (21/563)
We *parches* the coffee. (21/560)

They said,"we *wants* to raise you as an intelligent nigger. We *wants* you to have good friends like we have got."[3] (ESR/JM/7-9)
We *celebrate* that day. (ESR/LS/218)

3rd p. They *write* me still. (11/1148)
But still it's me they *writes*. (11/1149)

They treating me right now that *knows* me, they treating me nice. (ESR/AG/27-8)
And they all treating me mighty nice, all the white folks that *know* me, they treats me nice. (ESR/AG/32-4)

(1b) NON-FINITE:

You'll put the rice on the fire and *cooks* it. (8/354)
I don't hardly *walks* out. I don't hardly *walks* out nowhere. (17/198)
'Cause I gotta *makes*, you know, exercise. (3/708)
The church *bes* crammed down with people. (19/215)

2.0. Previous analyses of Black English *-s*

Several competing analyses have been proposed for the behaviour of verbal *-s*: in what follows we briefly recapitulate some of the arguments.

2.1. Hypercorrection

Early research suggests that verbal *-s* has no grammatical function in VBE, and is inserted irregularly in "odd, unpredictable and idiosyncratic positions" (Labov et al. 1968:165), i.e. in persons other than third, as well as in the non-finite contexts listed in (1b) above. Three types of evidence have been adduced in favour of this characterization (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972):

i) the uninflected verb was found to be the predominant form in the third singular in VBE, undergoing deletion at far greater rates than monomorphemic or plural *-s* (Labov et al. 1968:164)[4],

ii) *-s* variability was not generally affected by style shifting (Labov et al. 1968:164), especially among younger speakers[5] and, most important,

iii) *-s* deletion was not subject to the regular phonological conditioning found in studies of deletion of other final consonants.

"Hyper-*s*"[6] usage was described by Bickerton (1975:134) in relation to English-based creoles as "tacking on a morpheme which [a speaker] knows
is characteristic of the standard language but which he has not yet learnt to use correctly". Consistent with this interpretation, nonconcord *-s* in VBE has been shown to evidence considerable variability across individuals, though apparently affected by extra-linguistic factors: it is least characteristic of educated, formal, middle-class adult speech. Its "irregular and unsystematic character" (Labov et al. 1968:167) suggests that the behaviour of 3rd p. sg. *-s* does not represent an extension of the regular rules of Standard English, as is the case of the copula and the past-tense morpheme, but is the result of external norms and overt social pressures. Myhill and Harris (1986:31) propose that *-s* may have been reinterpreted as a purely stylistic or accommodative device for rendering one's speech more suitable for interaction with speakers of Standard English.

Moreover, Fasold's (1972) analyses of possible nonphonological constraints on 3rd p. sg. *-s* absence, such as collective vs. noncollective subject, showed no significant effect. The only constraint to emerge was one promoting deletion on the second member of a conjoined verb phrase (see also Myhill and Harris 1986:28) which Fasold attributes to the "rapid onset of a fatigue factor" (p. 130). These facts, taken together, do not support a characterization of *-s* (whether concord or nonconcord) as an integral part of the vernacular grammar.

2.2. Aspectual marker

A second interpretation is that verbal *-s* is neither random in use nor the result of "unstable acquisition" of SAE present-tense marking, but an aspectual feature which marks durative (Jeremiah 1977, Pitts 1981, Brewer 1986) or habitual (Roberts 1976, Pitts 1986) aspect. Under this analysis, the variable occurrence of *-s* and *-Ø* in the same syntactic environment would be due to the fact that each form has a distinct semantic function. Brewer (1986:131) observes that many blacks report a contrast between the examples in (2):

(2a) If I live*Ø* in Boone ... I have just moved there.
(2b) If I live*s* in Boone ... I have lived there a long time.

These researchers accept the conclusion that VBE has no present-tense marker but eschew the assumption (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972) that *-s* is a hypercorrect intrusion from SAE. VBE *-s* is rather an "adoption of a Standard English form without the Standard English grammatical component" (Pitts 1981:304).

Bickerton's brief (1975) examination of number concord in Guyanese Creole reveals the same sporadic distribution of third singular *-s* noted in the early studies of VBE. He suggests that some puzzling facts about nonconcord *-s* in that dialect might be clarified by taking into account the creole aspectual category [-punctual]. According to him, contemporary variation in *-s* usage is one manifestation of a developmental phase in the process of decreolization: as *doz* reduces to *-s* or *-z* in rapid speech, "the *-s* or *-z* remains in category but is simply transferred from pre- to post-verbal position". This *-s* would represent a hypercorrected version of *doz*, which occurs in environments that are [-punctual] (1975:136). Building on Bickerton's suggestion, Pitts (1981:307) analyzes *-s* as a relexification of habitual *de* found in Gullah (and presumably in an American plantation creole), brought about by means of a "transformation [in which] contracted *-s* from *is* replaces the verbal suffix of progression *-ing*, and the durative aspect is maintained".

Although these analyses differ somewhat in their derivation of the form, they generally concur that the function of *-s* is analogous to that of a creole-like pre-verbal aspectual marker which may have moved to post-verbal position under influence from Standard English.[7] Of course, in the process of decreolization, dialect mixture of creole and SAE categories may result. Indeed, Pitts argues for two *-s* in VBE, a tense marker and an aspect marker (1986:76)[8], encoded as a single surface form with different meanings

and functions within the same system.

2.3. Verbal agreement marker

For at least some black speakers, verbal *-s* marks agreement with 3rd p. sg. subjects in favourable social contexts (and presumably, preferentially in certain linguistic environments as well, though these remain unspecified). This is implicit in Wolfram's and Fasold's figures for black middle-class adults (who arguably are no longer vernacular speakers), but is also discernable, though weakly, even in the "deep vernacular" speech studied by Myhill and Harris (1986:31). Exploitation of *-s* in this function would depend on a speaker's knowledge of the (SAE) system and her desire to accommodate to it.

2.4. Synchronic dialectal remnant

Schneider (1983) suggests that verbal *-s* is neither a post-creole importation from Standard English in the third person, nor a case of hypercorrection in other persons, but simply a continuation of the tendency prevalent throughout the history of English to mark (or fail to mark) *-s* across the verbal paradigm (see also McDavid (1969, 1977), McDavid and Davis (1972) Feagin (1979:196) and section (4.0) below).

Contra the creole-origin position, Schneider reasons (p. 104) that if the inflectional system of contemporary VBE derived from an earlier suffixless system, with occurrences of *-s* due to hypercorrection or convergence with SAE during the process of decreolization, *-s* should occur infrequently, if at all, in earlier black speech. His examination of the use of inflected and uninflected verbs in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narratives (Federal Writers Project 1941) reveals exactly the opposite to be the case: *-s* appears with 72% of the 3rd p. sg. subjects, leading him to reject hypercorrection as an appropriate description of the phenomenon. However, he found *-s* to predominate in all other persons (with the exception of 2nd p. sg.) as well. Schneider suggests that the mixture of settlers from different dialect areas (specifically, Northern Britain, where the present-tense verbal paradigm has been characterized as having *-s* throughout, and Southern Britain, where -Ø is said to prevail) resulted in a mixed linguistic concord (or nonconcord) system characterized by variable but frequent use of *-s* (ibid.). One could thus expect regional differences in early Black English according to the origin of the majority of the settlers in a particular area, and in fact, Schneider's breakdown of the data by region shows high *-s* rates in all grammatical persons in the South Atlantic States, while in States situated to the west of the Mississippi (Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas), there is a tendency to approximate SAE, with -Ø predominating in all persons but 3rd p. sg. (pp. 104-105; this tendency is not mentioned, but may also be observed, in the data presented in Brewer 1986).

Schneider suggests two stages in the development of the VBE *-s* inflection (pp. 106-107): in the first stage Black American slaves acquired the nonstandard inflectional system of their white linguistic models (itself a blend of two competing British English dialect systems), characterized by variable but

predominant use of *-s* in all persons. At a later stage the growing influence of standardization led to a progressive decline of *-s* but this proceeded differentially according to region. This tendency would have affected not only persons where -Ø inflection is grammatical in the standard language, but *also* 3rd singular, by means of a hypercorrective (regularizing) movement toward less *-s* usage. This might also account for contemporary patterns of VBE verbal inflection.

2.5. Narrative present marker

Recent quantitative work on a Philadelphia dialect of VBE (Myhill and Harris 1986) offers yet another interpretation of the function of verbal *-s*. Observing that while VBE speakers do not have a subject-verb agreement rule[9], they note that widespread reports of the sporadic occurrence of *-s* nonetheless indicate general awareness of its existence. Thus the dialect would contain a morpheme which is clearly verbal, yet which lacks a transparent grammatical rôle. This situation allows for the possibility of *-s* being assigned some function. In their study of the distribution of verbal *-s* in narrative and other discourse of five VBE speakers, they found it to be associated with narrative clauses, regardless of person and number of the subject (p. 27). They conclude that a formerly grammatically empty inflection has been reinterpreted as a marker of Historical Present in narrative, and observe that while inflection on non-3rd p. sg. subjects has been reported for other English dialects, it has never been attested specifically as a marker of narrative clauses (p. 30). Thus they view this usage as an innovation, made possible by the existence of an inflection with no clear grammatical function. Though their study is limited to only five speakers, they suspect that the phenomenon is in fact much more widespread, having gone unobserved by linguists because of data collection situations in which the social function of *-s* (that of accommodation to white interviewers) obscured its linguistic function. Indeed, Labov (1985) points to the reinterpretation of *-s* as a grammatical device as the "single strongest piece of evidence" that VBE is diverging from SAE.

3.0. Conflicting Analyses

The discussion in section (2.0) above gives some indication of the extent of the controversy concerning the precise status of verbal *-s* in VBE. The central question — that of its origin and function in the grammar — is given four different answers:

1) *-S* does not have a grammatical function in the dialect. Its occurrence is irregular and is not governed by internal grammatical constraints, but rather by the exterior norms and overt social pressures exerted by SAE. It is a case of hypercorrection (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972).

2) At an earlier stage (and possibly now), *-s* had the grammatical function of marking habitual or durative aspect. Its occurrence is governed by an underlying creole grammar that is distinct from SAE (Bickerton 1975, Roberts 1976, Pitts 1981, 1986; also Brewer 1986).

3) At an earlier stage (and possibly now), *-s* had the grammatical function of marking present tense. Its occurrence was variable but not irregular, and stemmed from the mixture of contrasting marking patterns in the English dialects to which the early slaves were exposed (Schneider 1983).

4) In contemporary VBE *-s* has the function of marking Historical Present regardless of person and number of the subject. Its occurrence is variable but not irregular and is a recent innovation (Myhill and Harris 1986).

It might be supposed that with the benefit of careful examination of these analyses and of the linguistic evidence adduced in their favour (to which we have alluded only cursorily thus far; see below), it should be a simple matter to choose between them. Nothing could be farther from the case. One reason is that the approaches, data sets, and methodologies used by the authors differ considerably, often making it impossible to draw conclusions. Indeed, to our knowledge, no single aspect of linguistic variation has been so widely studied with so little progress toward reaching a consensus. Baugh (1987) has recently devoted an entire paper to precisely this point. By way of illustration it will be instructive to re-examine in more detail some of the findings cited above.

The most striking example of lack of comparability appears in two quantitative analyses of the same data base, the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (Schneider 1983, Brewer 1986). Schneider reports that the *-s* suffix is not only the quantitatively dominant form in these data, but that of all persons, it is used most frequently with third singular, at a rate of 72%[10] (p. 103). Brewer, on the other hand, finds that the occurrence of *-s* with *non*-3rd p. sg. subjects is the rule rather than the exception, more than half of the examples occurring with 1st p. sg. Table 1 reproduces the quantitative data on which these conclusions are based.

Table 1: *-S* usage by person in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (taken from Schneider 1983:105 and Brewer 1986:136)

		SINGULAR			PLURAL	
		1 %	2 %	3 %	1 %	3 %
South Carolina	Schneider 1983	54.4	45.0	70.5	—	70.2
	Brewer 1986	65.0	21.9	4.0	1.6	7.3
Texas	Schneider 1983	47.3	25.0	75.0	—	50.0
	Brewer 1986	50.8	Ø	19.9	15.0	14.3

In comparing these figures, we observe that while Schneider also finds 1st p. sg. to be marked about half the time, it is by no means the most frequently marked person in the paradigm. How can this discrepancy be explained? Schneider calculated the proportion of *-s* out of all inflected *and* uninflected verbs in each person, while Brewer analyzed only what percentage of the inflected verbs (i.e. *-s* presence) was associated with each person. The figures are thus not comparable: only the former provide us with information on the *propensity* of a grammatical person to receive marking.[11]

Brewer further reports that *-s* functions in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives as a durative marker. This emerges from examining the co-occurrence of *-s* with temporal adverbs: of 153 instances of *-s* in the immediate environment of a temporal adverb, 67% of those adverbs were continuous or durative. Since this analysis again neglects to take account of the distribution of uninflected verbs, the results are difficult to interpret. That more instances of *-s* appeared in durative contexts may simply reflect the fact that such contexts themselves occur more frequently than others. Indeed, consideration of 200 Standard English present-tense sentences[12] (which evidence no variation in verbal concord), reveals that durative/continuous contexts make up nearly half the environments in which present tense is found (Table 2):

Table 2: Distribution of aspectual contexts in which Standard English present tense is used

ASPECT	%	N
Durative/continuous	46.5	93
Habitual/iterative	28.0	56
Punctual	20.5	41

Similarly, when we reanalyze our own data on early Black English according to Brewer's method (i.e. by charting the distribution of *-s* across aspectual contexts), we also find the misleading result that more *-s* occur in durative environments (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of *-s* (proportion of *-s* out of all *-s*) in various aspectual contexts in Early Black English

	Samaná		Ex-Slave Recordings	
ASPECT	% [*-s*]	N	% [*-s*]	N
Durative/continuous	43.5	324	61.9	26
Habitual/iterative	40.8	304	16.7	7
Punctual	15.6	116	21.4	9

However, as we will show in section (7.3.2.1) below, when both *-s and* -Ø usage are treated, we find no

particular propensity in either data set for *-s* to mark durative aspect.

Problems arising from selective analysis of the data may be illustrated graphically by yet another proposal for the aspectual function of *-s* (Pitts 1986). Though he offers no quantitative data in support, Pitts contends that *-s* is a habitual marker, not only in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, but also in contemporary VBE. The latter conclusion emerges from his re-examination of a segment of Labov's (1968) data, reproduced below for convenience.

Vernon:	But those police don't really wanta break it up; they just *wants* their share. That cop **hang** out in our hall cause it's warm, but that's how he **in** on the numbers.
Reggie:	When things *gets* bad, the lieutenant **get** wind of something: he **get** mad and **say**, "There's gonna be no more numbers". Then they *starts* bringin' peoples in. They don't really wanta bring you in; they *throws* you out by nine in the morning.
Richard:	My mother says [sic] you'd think colored cops [would] be nicer than the white cops, but they just about the same. But we *needs* police. They *protects* you from the big kids that **throw** the rocks, **make** your eye go out.
Vernon:	No one person owns [sic] the numbers. And when you win, they *comes* on your street and *tells* you. (from Pitts 1986:79)

Pitts claims that *-s* usage in these data illustrates an association between the marker and verbs denoting habitual action (italicized in Pitts 1986). This is in fact basically true (two of the *-s* marked contexts are actually durative: *wants, needs*), but a review of the *uninflected* verbs in the same passage (which we indicate in bold face) reveals that these too denote habitual (or iterative) aspect![13]

Pitts (1986:76) further suggests that *-s* incorporates a dual function — that of tense marker and that of aspect marker, labelled "tense-z" and "aspectual-z" respectively (see also Roberts 1976). By tabulating the *-s* markers found in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, he finds that once the two "grammatical" (i.e. tense and aspect) *-s* are accounted for, only 25 instances (8%) of unsystematic ("hyper") *-s* remain. (Again there is no comparison of the distribution of uninflected verbs.) Since, as mentioned above, these two functions are encoded in the same surface form, the question arises as to how they can be distinguished. Pitts suggests that *-s* is a tense marker when it 1) occurs in a series with other past-tense verbs, or 2) is immediately preceded by a past-tense adverbial construction, and when its temporal reference is not anterior to that of a preceding verb. *-S* is an aspect marker when it occurs with 1) stative verbs not collocated with a punctual adverb, and 2) event or process verbs used in habitual contexts. He observes (p. 76) that "in order to keep the two functions of *-z* separate, the aspectual and tense *-z* do not seem to occur in the same syntactic phrase".

Without addressing the circularity of this definition, note that the "tense-z" alluded to by Pitts ap-

pears to encompass past temporal reference only; 3rd p. sg *-s* is of course also used in Standard English to mark present temporal reference, of which no mention is made.[14] Moreover, "since the present tense is essentially used to describe, rather than to narrate, it is essentially imperfective, either continuous or habitual" (Comrie 1976:66). Indeed, in many languages, including English, habitual aspectual meaning is *encoded* in the present tense. It therefore seems unlikely that the figures given by Pitts for "aspectual-z" and "tense-z" in the slave narratives (1986:77) in fact correspond to mutually exclusive usages, since they probably reflect the distinction between Historical Present and other present contexts.

Thus previous contentions to the effect that the function of *-s* is that of an aspectual marker cannot be assessed from the available data.

4.0. Historical precursors of *-s* variability

Though contemporary prescriptive usage requires strict subject-verb agreement in the present indicative, the historical record shows that concord was not always categorical.

Modern English *-s* is generally considered a reflex of Old English *-þ*, which marked present indicative in 3rd p. sg. and all persons in the plural (e.g. Jespersen 1909/49:15).[15] One of the chief characteristics of the transition between Old English and Middle English verbal forms is the gradual loss of many of the older verbal endings. By the Middle English period, inflection in the present indicative was basically uniform across the paradigm, though the choice of marker varied across dialects. This can be observed in the verbal paradigm for Middle English *hēre(n)* 'to hear', reproduced in Table 4.

Table 4. Regional distribution of verbal inflections in Middle English (from Mossé 1952:78)

	North	Midlands	South
Singular			
1st p.	hēr(e)(s)[16]	hēre	hēre
2nd p.	hēres	hēres(t)	hēr(e)st
3rd p.	hēres	hēres, hēreþ	hēreþ
Plural	hēres	hēres, hēre(n)	hēreþ

Use of verbal *-s* for all persons and numbers was apparently a dialectal feature of Northern English (e.g. Wright 1905:175-6, Jespersen 1909/1949:16, Strang 1970:146). It was here, according to Curme (1977:52), that the original 2nd p. sg. verbal ending *-s* spread first to 2nd p. pl., then to other persons of the plural, and finally to 3rd p. sg., so that in the Old English period, *-s* was (variably) used in the North for all persons and numbers but 1st sg. By Middle English, it appeared throughout the paradigm. At this time it spread geographically to the Midlands where it coexisted with *-þ* in 3rd p. sg. and occurred variably

in the plural. Later the *-s* inflection became established in London and in the South more generally, first affecting only the spoken language, and subsequently penetrating written styles. Literary use of *-s* to represent popular or informal speech is amply attested. Shakespeare employed it in colloquial prose, while *-þ* was used categorically in the more serious style required for Bible translations (Curme 1977:53). By the early 17th century *-s* gradually became established in all styles of literary language, but only in the 3rd p. sg.[17], rather than throughout the paradigm, as in Northern English. This development, undoubtedly responsible for the contemporary form of the Standard English indicative present-tense paradigm, was nonetheless preceded by considerable variation in written texts (cf. Holmqvist 1922, Curme 1977), generally agreed to have derived from parallel variation in the spoken language.

Though historians are not in total agreement either on the exact origin of verbal *-s* (whether it arose through sound change from *-þ* (v. Holmqvist 1922:2) or through analogical extension (ibid.:3, Wardale 1937:101, Wakelin 1977:119), or on the reasons for its replacement of *-þ* (because it increased the number of rhymes available for poetry (Jespersen 1909/49:16)), or because it was more easily articulated (ibid.:17), there is general consensus on a number of points.

1) Alternation among inflections (including *-s*, *-þ* and *-Ø*) of the present indicative has been a longstanding, well-documented feature of the language since the Old English period (Jespersen 1909/49:16, Holmqvist 1922:15, Brunner 1963:70, Curme 1977:53, Wakelin 1977:119).

2) The variation originated in colloquial speech, and subsequently passed into the written language (Jespersen 1909/49:17-18, Holmqvist 1922:159, Wyld 1927:256, Curme 1977:53).

3) Competing marking patterns in the indicative present-tense paradigm were regional variants. In fact, the verbal *-s* inflection has been considered one of the safest criteria in determining the dialectal origin of a Middle English text (Jespersen 1909/49:76-79, Holmqvist 1922:72, Wardale 1937:102, Barber 1976:242, Curme 1977:53, Wakelin 1977:119)

4) Until at least the early 17th century *-s* was apparently a marker of popular, colloquial or dialectal speech (Jespersen 1909/49:19, Holmqvist 1922:185, Strang 1970:146, Barber 1976:239, Curme 1977:53)

In view of such pervasive variability, apparent even from the historical record, it is most likely that at least some aspects of the linguistic and/or social environments exerted a regular influence on *-s* occurrence. Unambiguous reconstruction of these factors and their respective weights is far beyond the scope of this paper; fortunately, there do exist reports of at least two syntactic conditioning factors.

One widely attested constraint involves the type of subject of the verb. From the Middle English

period on, there has been a tendency throughout England for verbs to retain inflection when accompanied by a full NP subject, while verbs with pronominal subjects, especially when post-posed, have tended to remain uninflected (e.g. Brunner 1963:70-71). This pattern has spread to all persons in many modern British dialects (Wright 1905:176, Jespersen 1909/49:15, Wakelin 1977:119).

Another involves the definiteness of the subject. In Modern Standard English the inflected form of the verb is prescribed after indefinite pronominal subjects (e.g. *everybody, nobody, anyone*, etc.); in older English the uninflected form was common in these contexts, as they were often interpreted as plurals (Visser 1970:74,-Curme 1977:51-52); this tendency has also persisted in popular modern speech (Kennedy 1970:497).

5.0. *-S* variability in Modern English

The vigorous variation in *-s* usage throughout the history of English coupled with the dearth of reports of parallel phenomena in modern white usage would suggest that the variability has by now resolved itself in contemporary White English in favour of the standard prescriptive variant: *-s* in 3rd p. sg. only. However, Hughes and Trudgill (1979:16-17) observe that in a number of non-standard British (particularly East Anglian) dialects, the present-tense verbal paradigm is completely regular as a result of the absence of 3rd p. sg. *-s*. In the North of Britain, as well as in the Southwest and South Wales, the regularization is of the opposite kind, with *-s* occurring in all verbal persons. Indeed, Trudgill (1974:61) describes 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement as a linguistic variable involved in very marked social as well as stylistic variation. Table 5 reproduces his proportions of 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement in Norwich.

Table 5. % of 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement in Norwich (from Hughes and Trudgill 1979:204)

Social Class	%
Upper Middle Class	100
Lower Middle Class	71
Upper Working Class	25
Middle Working Class	19
Lower Working Class	3

The lower-working class informants in his study show almost categorical lack of subject-verb concord, with very little style-shifting. In fact, the overall norm for the working class is less than 30% concord. It is interesting to note, however, that even middle-class speakers fail to observe concord in casual speech nearly a third of the time[18]. In Reading, on the other hand, as in many other southwestern varieties of British English, Cheshire (1982) found categorical use of *-s* in 3rd p. sg., but it also occurred more than half of the time in other verbal persons in the speech of the young peer groups she studied (p.

32). Strikingly enough, even the formal speech of the elderly speakers in her sample showed nonconcord *-s* usage 30% of the time.

There have been several anecdotal reports of both lack of subject-verb concord and nonconcord *-s* in white American dialects (McDavid 1969, McDavid & Davis 1972, McDavid 1972) as well as some quantitative studies (Wolfram 1971, Feagin 1979, Sommer 1986). The phenomenon has thus far only been reported in the Southern U.S., which has been considered to be least prone, until recently, to standardizing influences (McDavid 1969, Schneider 1983). Not surprisingly, those studies that have investigated linguistic conditioning of *-s* usage, find remnants of the effects cited in the historical record. For example, though Feagin (1979:190) finds that 3rd p. pl. pronominal subjects in Anniston (Alabama) English always receive the standard -Ø mark, nonagreement (i.e. nonstandard *-s* usage) reaches 58.4% among rural informants when the subject is a full noun phrase. Hackenberg (1973, cited in Feagin 1979) found up to 69% nonagreement in this context in West Virginia.

It is thus apparent that the accumulated body of research has not furnished a consensus on the origins, status, or function(s) of verbal *-s* in Vernacular Black English. In the remainder of this paper, we explore empirically the behaviour of this variable, paying particular attention to the linguistic and social contexts of its occurrence, within a historical and comparative perspective. This will enable us to determine whether the variation observed in early and modern Black English *-s* usage has a precedent in the history of the language, or is rather an intrusion from another system.

6.0. Data and methods

The data on which this report is based were extracted from two data sets. The first is a corpus of tape-recorded interviews with 21 native English-speaking descendants of American ex-slaves residing in Samaná. We consider the dialect of these informants, aged 71-103 in 1982, to derive from a variety of English spoken by American blacks in the early 1820's[19]. The second data set consists of 11 recordings of former slaves born between 1844 and 1861 (see Bailey et al., to appear), who presumably acquired their language some four or five decades after the ancestors of the Samaná informants.

From the tape-recorded interviews we extracted each verbal construction with the potential for variable *-s* or -Ø marking, totalling 2485 cases from the Samaná data base and 374 from the Ex-Slave Recordings[20]. Though we will attempt to provide explicit comparisons between the data sets where possible, it should be borne in mind that these may be vitiated by the paucity of data in the Ex-Slave Recordings[21].

6.1. Circumscribing the variable context

In order to examine the behaviour of verbal *-s* it was first necessary to delimit its context of occurrence.

Observing that verbal *-s* alternates with zero among all speakers in all persons[22] (see (1a) above), we thus extracted from both corpora every construction containing what we determined to be a present-tense verb with the potential for inflection Although this has not been explicitly addressed in the literature on this subject, the task of circumscribing the variable context for *-s* presents special difficulties. In particular, an independent process of consonant cluster simplification renders the surface forms of regular (weak) present- and past-tense verbs indistinguishable, as in (3):

(3) She *live*Ø (< [z] or [d]?) right up yonder. (05/224)
So she *gain*Ø (< [z] or [d]?) half and I *gain*Ø (< [z] or [d]?) half. (07/866)

Inclusion of past-tense verbs with phonologically deleted markers as instances of uninflected present-tense forms will obviously skew the proportions of *-s* presence (cf. Myhill and Harris 1986). We thus excluded from our data base all forms for which past reference could be inferred, whether from adverbial or other temporal disambiguating constructions, as in (4) and (5), from a sequential overt past-tense inflection, as in (6), or from the larger context of discourse[23].

(4) He remainØ here *three years*. (10/940)
He liveØ with mama thirty, thirty-two years ... (ESR/LS/339-40)

(5) I *used to live* down there, and where I liveØ I had all that coffee planted. (3/407).

(6) He *brought* me one and he remainØ with one. (3/1076)

In contrast to earlier studies of VBE which reported extensive use of verbal *-s* with non-finite constructions (e.g. questions, imperatives, modal + verb, negatives, non-finite and invariant *be*, etc.), we find these to be extremely rare or nonexistent in both the Samaná and Ex-Slave materials[24]. There have also been suggestions that lexical factors might exert an influence on *-s* usage (e.g. Labov et al. 1968, Fasold 1972). In the Samaná data all verbs seem to behave comparably with the exception of *got* and *say*, both of which received very little marking in concord and nonconcord positions[25]. Since exclusion of the former from our calculations did not materially affect the results, it was retained in the analysis; *say*, on the other hand, was excluded (v. fn. 38).

A number of constructions show no variability in *-s* usage (remaining categorically inflected or uninflected), and thus were excluded from further analysis. These include various frozen expressions (e.g. *you believe, I tell you*[26]), verbs occurring in songs or sayings, which may have been learned by rote, as in (7), phonologically neutralized sequences as in (8), and constructions with potential *have* or *would* deletion, as in (9) and (10).

(7) Practice *makes* perfect. (ESR/163/34)
(8) All these children *speak* Spanish. (07/2038)
(9) Since that, the sugar had went up even to thirty cents .. and it Ø *come* back now to twenty. (02/891)
(10) Any boat we met, if it was there, we Ø *sail* it (01/633)

We also excluded constructions containing verbs which are "inherently" ambiguous as to past or present reference (e.g. *put, set, beat*), as well as examples in which an unambiguous interpretation of temporal reference was in doubt. Although it is possible that there still remain some verbs which were not appropriately disambiguated by us, these would be few in number. Thus the analyses which follow provide a clear picture of the use of *-s* in contexts which (at least in Standard English) permit or require the present tense.

6.2. Coding and analysis

Each present-tense verb retained in the data base was coded for a series of phonological, morphological and syntactic factors which could have an effect on verbal *-s* expression. These included the underlying phonetic form of *-s* ([s, z or əz]), the surrounding phonological environment, features of the noun phrase, features of the verb, and syntactic and discourse features. These factors were first analyzed individually, and then simultaneously by means of GoldVarb (Sankoff 1988), a logistic regression package for the Macintosh computer.

For the statistical analyses we adopt here it is necessary to posit a relationship between variants which specifies the set of tokens assumed to have been eligible for rule application and the set of tokens assumed to have been transformed by the rule. The resulting configuration is often formalized in terms of certain underlying forms giving rise to weaker (or deleted) variants. This additional formalization is not necessary to estimate the effects of the different factors on variant usage, however. Since there is no consensus for determining which variant of verbal *-s* is underlying — whether [Ø] (which would imply that all occurrences of [s] are insertions) or [s] (implying that instances of [Ø] are deletions) — we simply adopted the standard English configuration as an operational tool. We distinguish 3rd p. sg. from all other contexts, and consider, for the purposes of the analysis, -Ø marked instances of the former to be cases of deletion, and *-s*-marked verbs in all other persons to be insertions. Note, however, that the analyses we will present do not depend on the particular derivational sequence we have postulated[27] (see also Poplack 1979:53ff.), and should not at this stage be interpreted as a theoretical claim for the underlying form of verbal *-s*.

7.0. Results

7.1. Distribution of *-s* across the verbal paradigm

Table 6 depicts the distribution of verbal *-s* presence by grammatical person in early Black English.

Table 6. Distribution of verbal *-s* by grammatical person in the Samaná and Ex-Slave Recordings

	Samaná		Ex-Slave Recordings	
	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N
Singular				
1st	20	609	3	173
2nd	/	414	0	59
3rd	56	604	71	42
Plural				
1st	22	176	(29	7)[28]
2nd	(0	7)	(0	1)
3rd	31	675	5	92
Totals		2485		374

While in the Detroit and Washington studies verbal *-s* was generally absent from all forms (Wolfram 1969:138, Fasold 1972:133), sometimes occurring on 3rd p. sg. and sometimes[29] on other persons, the Samaná materials show *-s* to be *present* much of the time, particularly on 3rd p. sg., but also non-negligibly on 3rd p. pl. and 1st p. sg. and pl. Note that while these rates appear high in relation to the VBE materials studied in urban American contexts, they are substantially lower (in all persons) than those reported by Schneider (1983:103, 105) for the WPA Slave Narratives. On the other hand, we observe considerably more *-s* usage in Samaná than in the Ex-Slave Recordings, where, despite rather sparse data, *-s* is nonetheless virtually confined to 3rd p. sg. subjects[30]. Though the association of *-s* with 3rd p. sg. in the Ex-Slave Recordings is consistent with the onset of "standardization" described by Schneider, the differences in rate are more likely due to other factors which we are not in a position to assess (such as interviewer or transcriber effect (see Baugh 1987)). At this point, we note only that in each of the data sets *-s* is most likely to occur with 3rd p. sg., where it is present over half the time.[31] In ensuing sections we focus on the patterning of *-s* usage according to a number of factors, in order to address the question of its function in the two data sets.

7.2. Phonological effects on *-s* usage

One of the most widely accepted views concerning verbal *-s* inflection in dialects of Black English is that its occurrence is not phonologically conditioned. This finding constitutes the crux of the argument that verbal *-s* is not part of the underlying grammar of VBE. The conclusion is based on a view of language in which a set of syntactic rules generates forms on which phonological rules may subsequently operate. Thus, if random hypercorrection were entirely responsible for the non-3rd p. sg. *-s* forms and 3rd p. sg. *-Ø* forms, there should be no way of differentiating the phonological environments containing the two. If, on the other hand, the deleted variants result from the application of phonological rules to syntactically generated *-s* and *-Ø*, the distribution of these alternate forms may be expected to be influenced by the

surrounding phonological environment.

7.2.1. Underlying Phonetic Form

Each token of verbal *-s* was coded for one of three phonetic manifestations whose occurrence is conditioned by the phonological features of the final segment of the base word: [s] occurs following non-strident voiceless segments, [z] following non-strident voiced segments and vowels, and [əz] following stridents. In studies of the past-tense morpheme, the phonetic shape of the suffix, with parallel variants [t, d, Id], was found to have a significant effect on the frequency of its deletion, the morpheme being deleted less when it was bisegmental. In the case of verbal *-s*, however, it has been claimed that phonetic shape has little or no effect on retention of *-s* (e.g. Fasold 1971:361). Table 7 displays the distribution of *-s* and -Ø across different base forms in early Black English.

Table 7: Relationship of underlying phonetic form to *-s* usage

	/s/		/z/		/əz/	
3rd p. sg. Deletion (*-s* → -Ø)	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N
Samaná	50	212	44	365	7	27
Ex-Slave Narratives	33	15	23	26	(0	1)
Other than 3rd Insertion (-Ø → *-s*)	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N
Samaná	21	830	21	974	31	77
Ex-Slave Narratives	4	117	3	207	(0	8)

The table shows that when the phonetic form of *-s* is [əz] it is retained more often on both third and non-third persons in Samaná English[32], showing the same pattern as that attested for the *-t,d* suffix. The bisegmental form of *-s* is most salient phonologically and thus it is reasonable that it should be retained more often.

7.2.2. Environmental factors

No previous study of verbal *-s* has recognized the existence of environmental phonological conditioning of its occurrence. Labov et al. (1968:164) report a surprising tendency for a following vocalic segment to *increase* deletion rates, contrary to widely replicated patterns for deletion of other final consonants. Wolfram

(1969:137) finds virtually identical deletion rates in intervocalic and interconsonantal environments. Fasold (1972:125) reports no significant effect of either preceding or following phonological segment. Table 8 examines the effect of phonological environment on verbal *-s* presence in early Black English.

Table 8: Effect of preceding and following phonological environment on verbal *-s* presence

	Preceding segment				Following segment					
	Vowel		Consonant		Vowel		Consonant		Pause	
3rd p. sg. deletion (*s* → -Ø)	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N
Samaná	37	94	45	510	39	231	47	344	55	29
Ex-Slaves	11	9	33	33	30	27	29	14	(0	1)
non-3rd insertion (-Ø → *-s*)	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N
Samaná	27	315	20	1566	24	632	20	1184	31	65
Ex-Slaves	7	86	2	246	4	235	4	77	Ø	20

In contrast to the abovementioned studies of VBE, we observe a small but consistent phonological effect, in the expected direction[33]. A preceding vocalic segment promotes retention of *-s*, regardless of grammatical person, as has been found in studies of deletion of other final consonants (e.g. Labov et al. 1968:130). In the following context, a pause is least conducive to retention, as is also typical of *-t,d* deletion patterns among contemporary VBE speakers (Guy 1980:28). Moreover, the effect of phonological context is consistent across the majority of individual Samaná speakers for whom there is sufficient data in each environment. (Parallels to this patterning are clear in the Ex-Slave Recordings only for the preceding segment.) In fact, the ranking of following consonant versus vowel in the Samaná data is also mirrored in Fasold's (1972:127) analysis of 3rd p. sg. *-s* deletion among a subsample of pre-adolescent and adolescent males in Washington, and corroborated in his analysis of the effect of phonological sequence for all speakers[34].

In summary, looking at the phonological influences one by one, and without taking into account non-phonological factors, there appears to be a phonological effect on both concord and nonconcord *-s* usage in early Black English. On the one hand this is manifested as a tendency to preserve *-s* when it is bisegmental, and on the other, when it appears in non-consonantal environments. Though the latter effect is not unattested in earlier studies of this phenomenon in VBE, despite claims to the contrary, the consistency of this effect in concord *and* nonconcord contexts has not to our knowledge been observed. We will have occasion to return to this result below.

7.3. Syntactic effects on *-s* usage

While previous studies have either reported no phonological conditioning of *-s* or have not treated the issue

at all, syntactic factors have been widely cited, even at earlier stages of the language (section 4.0). In this section we examine whether a number of constraints proposed in the literature may also account for *-s* variability in our data on early Black English.

7.3.1. Features of the subject

7.3.1.1. Type of subject

A widely cited syntactic condition on the occurrence of verbal *-s* is the propensity for -Ø marking following pronominal, as opposed to full NP, subjects (e.g. Sweet 1891:379, Wright 1905:176, Brunner 1963:70, Mossé 1952:79). Jespersen (1909/49:15) traces the origins of this constraint back to Old English, which subsequently gave rise to the Modern Scottish configuration. In this dialect *-s* is added in all persons so long as the subject is not pronominal: *they cum an' teake them* vs. *the burds cums an' paecks them* (ibid.). This pattern has also been noted for other present-day British (e.g. Midlands) dialects (Wakelin 1977:119). Thus, the trend toward more *-s* inflection with heavy NP subjects has been present from the inception of the verbal marking system to the present (Hackenberg 1973, Feagin 1979)[35].

We thus divided the subjects of the verbs under investigation according to whether they were pronominal, full or full noun phrase + relative, as in (11). Table 9 displays the effect of type of subject on verb inflection.

(11) *He* lives on the shore. (01/181)
And *my brother* lives in Limón. (06/1048)
The one what he follows has uh- sixty-three years. (04/318)

Table 9. Rates of verbal *-s* usage as a function of type of subject

	Pronoun		Full NP		Full NP + rel	
3rd p. sg.						
deletion -s → -Ø	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N
Samaná	45	441	45	114	29	49
Ex-slaves	27	26	27	26	31	16
non-3rd						
insertion -Ø → -s	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N
Samaná	20	1766	38	92	70	23
Ex-slaves	3	312	15	20	—	0

Although there is no difference in marking rates ascribable to pronominal vs. full NP subject in 3rd p. sg.

in either data set, we observe a marked tendency for verbs preceded by heavy noun phrases to receive inflection in other persons. Moreover, the heaviest NP context, i.e. NP + relative, most favours *-s* marking, an effect which has also been reported for nonstandard Southern White English (Feagin 1979:193). Although the rates of nonconcord in 3rd p. sg. contexts are actually lower in early Black English than those reported for contemporary white dialects (Hackenberg 1973, Feagin 1979), the patterning is identical, and replicates the historical attestations (see section 4.0).

7.3.1.2. Definiteness of the subject

Another constraint noted in the literature, primarily by researchers attributing *-s* variability to an underlying grammatical system distinct from standard English, is the differential treatment of indefinite vs. definite subjects. Bickerton (1975:137) suggests that the acquisition of 3rd p. sg. *-s* inflection on verbs with indefinite subjects would be inhibited in decreolizing Guyanese English, since these subjects are never marked in the underlying creole grammar. It has also been the case throughout the history of English that the verbs associated with some of these subjects have tended to lack inflection. Since the 18th century grammarians have frowned upon the prevalent misuse of verbal concord with grammatically singular indefinite pronominals (Visser 1970), cf. also the OED: "everyone: often incorrectly with plural verb", and "everybody: sometimes incorrectly with plural verb or pronoun". We thus distinguished indefinite subjects (including indefinite pronouns, e.g. *everything, it,* indefinite *you;* and noun phrases, e.g. *a boy, boys, people* etc.) as in (12a), from definite subjects, as in (12b).

(12a) *Nothing* worries me. (ESR/31/37)
People here now sing about "Roll, Jordan, Roll". (ESR/31/400)
Everybody knows. (ESR/40/30)

(12b) *The old people* likes to quarrel. (3/174)
I don't care whether *you* sing it or not. (ESR/31/426)
Ma knows them all. (ESR/38/311)

Table 10. Rates of verbal *-s* usage as a function of definiteness of the subject

	Definite subject		Indefinite subject	
3rd p. sg. deletion *-s* → *-Ø*	**%Ø**	**N**	**%Ø**	**N**
Samaná	43	478	48	126
Ex-Slaves	29	35	(29	7)
non-3rd insertion *-Ø* → *-s*	**%[-s]**	**N**	**%[-s]**	**N**
Samaná	26	1211	14	670
Ex-slaves	4	246	1	86

Table 10 in fact shows a slight tendency in both data sets (where data is sufficient) towards lesser use of *-s* with indefinite subjects, particularly in non-3rd p. sg. contexts. Note, however, that the constraint cited in the historical record appears to refer to indefinite *pronominals*, rather than to the feature of definiteness more generally. And in fact, when we examine the subclass of 3rd p. sg. indefinite pronominal subjects in the Samaná data in (13), the effects suggested by Table 10 are magnified, with 58% (N=26) deletion in this context.

(13) Everybody goes out ... (18/934)
Everybody wantØ to be walking up and down. (18/933)
Everything changeØ. (05/651)
Everything changes. (09/320)

Thus, while it is clear that indefinites tend not to receive inflection, it seems likely that this stems rather from the historical tendency for indefinite pronouns to remain unmarked, than from an underlying creole influence.

7.3.1.3. Collective vs. noncollective subject

Collective subjects have been observed to agree variably with the verb according to whether they are interpreted as singular or plural (Visser 1970:62, Traugott 1977:133). As there were no collective subjects in either of the data sets under examination, we were unable to investigate this effect.

7.3.2. Features of the verb

7.3.2.1. Verbal aspect

The essence of the debate over the semantic interpretation of verbal *-s* concerns its aspectual reading. In modern standard English 3rd p. sg. *-s* marks present tense simultaneously with a range of aspectual meanings: punctual, durative/iterative, habitual, etc. In creole languages, where the underlying system is generally characterized as aspect-prominent rather than tense-prominent, verbal marking is conditioned by the aspect of the verb. We have reviewed earlier suggestions (Bickerton 1975, Roberts 1977, Pitts 1981, 1986; Brewer 1986) that Black English *-s* is an aspectual marker, but the questions of 1) which aspect it marks and 2) the relationship of such behaviour to a prior creole grammar (over and above marking aspect at all) remain unresolved, largely because of the questionable way some of these conclusions were derived from the data. In this section we examine the tendency for *-s* marking according to the aspectual reading of the verb. Verbs were coded as punctual when they referred to an event (hypothetical or otherwise) which is understood to have occurred once, as in (14), as habitual/iterative when they referred to an event that takes place repeatedly, as in (15), and as durative/continuous when they referred to events or processes that are extended in time or states that exist continuously, as in (16). Note that this aspectual coding was based on contextual information (e.g. adverbials) and not solely on the verb itself.

(14) If she *comes* six o'clock in the morning, well, you have to be here eight o'clock to go. (10/770)
All at once, it- the rain *come*. (01/1250)

(15) Every yc r she *comes* here. (19/225)
People *comes* very often. (10/763)
Sometimes they *comes*. (03/1252)

(16) I think it *comes* by the teachers. (17/268)
The wire *come* from way out there. (11/961)
The Rodneys *come* from here in this Dominican Republic. (21/96)

Table 11 shows that, contrary to Brewer's (1986) contention, verbs tend to receive most *-s* marking when the aspect denoted by the verb is habitual, an effect which emerges most clearly in the Samaná data. Note, however, that this effect is most robust in 3rd p. sg. in both data sets (in the Ex-Slave Recordings there is little data on 3rd p. sg., and the effect disappears altogether in persons other than third). Can verbal *-s* then be characterized as an aspect marker? We return to this question in section (8.0) below.

Table 11. Rates of verbal *-s* usage as a function of verbal aspect

	Habitual/Iterative		Durative/Continuous		Punctual	
3rd p. sg. deletion *-s* → *-Ø*	%Ø	N	%Ø	N	%Ø	N
Samaná	27	150	50	347	50	107
Ex-slave	14	7	30	27	38	8
non-3rd insertion *-Ø* → *-s*	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N
Samaná	36	542	17	864	13	475
Ex-slaves	1	74	4	189	6	69

7.3.2.2. Verb type

Although this has not to our knowledge been specifically addressed in the literature, we wanted to ascertain whether there was any difference in marking rates between strong ("irregular") and weak ("regular") verbs. The Samaná data (but not the Ex-Slave Recordings) in Table 12 show a clear-cut tendency to retain *-s* on weak verbs, particularly in the third person. This is of course precisely the context where it would seem most crucial to disambiguate present-tense verbs from those with deleted past-tense clusters: weak verbs also showed most *-t,d* retention in these same materials (Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press).

Table 12. Rates of verbal *-s* usage with strong vs. weak verbs

	Strong Verb		Weak Verb	
3rd p. sg.				
deletion *-s* → *-Ø*	%Ø	N	%Ø	N
Samaná	52	361	37	271
Ex-slaves	32	31	33	15
non-3rd				
insertion *-Ø* → *-s*	%[*-s*]	N	%[*-s*]	N
Samaná	18	1296	23	664
Ex-slaves	4	176	3	150

7.4. Discourse factors

7.4.1. The sequence constraint

The operation of a "sequence" constraint on the occurrence of verbal *-s* has been attested by several researchers. This is the tendency for *-s* to occur only on the first conjunct of a conjoined pair or series of verbs (Fasold 1972:129, Myhill and Harris 1986:28). Butters (in press:7) also finds a tendency towards loss of the second *-s* on a conjunct in both Belizean English and Black English in Wilmington, S.C. The explanation for this type of sequencing is based on the assumption that *-s* use derives from an imported Standard English rule while *-Ø* reflects the use of the "proper Black English rule". Fasold (1972:130) notes that "while several speakers reverted to the Black English rule after having begun with the Standard English rule, ... none moved to the Standard English rule after having begun with Black English grammar". Table 13 summarizes the distribution of *-s* in conjoined verb phrases in the Samaná data base.

Table 13. Distribution of *-s* in conjoined verb phrases (with same or deleted subject)

Sequence	%	Sequence	%	N
-s + *-Ø*	35.3	*-s* + *-s*	64.7	34
-Ø + *-Ø*	91.8	*-Ø* + *-s*	8.2	86

Samaná English shows no propensity for the type of sequencing cited for VBE. In fact, the occurrence of *-s* on the first conjunct (regardless of whether it is concord or non-concord) promotes, rather than inhibits, the occurrence of *-s* on the second. On the other hand, once a zero is used, again regardless of person and number, another zero is most likely. A similar "local concord" effect was noted by Poplack (1981) for plural *-s* marking in Puerto Rican Spanish.

7.4.2. "Narrative" *-s*

As mentioned above, Myhill and Harris (1986) have found verbal *-s* to be concentrated almost exclusively in narrative clauses in contemporary VBE, regardless of person and number of the subject. Of course, the use of present-tense forms in narrative discourse (the "Historical Present") has been widely attested (Wolfson 1979, Schiffrin 1981, Silva-Corvalán 1983, Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press), but as Labov (1987:8) points out, this innovative use of *-s* should not be confused with it (cf. Butters, in press). VBE *-s* is *not* used for general present reference, but rather, is almost entirely confined to the past. Thus verbal *-s* usage has become specialized for the narrative past function.

Use of *-s* in this context was also noted by Roberts (1976), who observed that "the function of hyper-*s* is a feature of narrative style in almost all data on Black English. It seems to have been more common before than it is now for if one examines the ex-slave narratives in Botkin's [1945] *Lay My Burden Down* it is seen to be almost universal" (p. 8). Though he concedes that the tales in the collection were not transcribed from recorded speech, he finds it "inconceivable" that interviewers could have conspired to "flavour" their transcriptions with hyper-*s* so consistently precisely for narrative style.

We now compare the distribution of *-s* in narrative and non-narrative clauses in Samaná English with that reported by Myhill and Harris[36]. Adopting the stricter definition of narrative provided in Labov and Waletzky (1967) rather than the looser characterization of events which may be construed to have taken place at some point in the past (cf. Roberts 1976, Butters, in press), we replicate Myhill and Harris' (1986) analysis on a data base of narratives of personal experience recounted by the Samaná informants (Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press). Table 14 shows no sign of association of *-s* with narrative clauses in early Black English; on the contrary, the Samaná materials show exactly the opposite effect to that described by Myhill and Harris, with a tendency towards *-s absence* in such clauses.

Table 14. Distribution of verbal -s by grammatical person in narrative and non-narrative clauses in Samaná English and VBE (from Myhill and Harris 1986)

	SINGULAR						PLURAL					
	I		he/she		Full NP (sg.)		we		they		Totals	
	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N	%[-*s*]	N
M & H (1986)												
Narrative	32	50	59	54	55	31	61	18	—	0	50	153
Non-narrative	1	458	7	241	9	96	2	45	—	0	4	840
Samaná												
Narrative	0.5	188	0.3	215	3	35	6	18	0	41	2	497
Non-narrative	16	669	5	418	57	203	21	180	30	721	27	2633[37]

This appears most dramatically when compared with inflection rates for the same grammatical persons in non-narrative discourse. In persons other than third, -Ø inflection is, of course, consistent with a present-tense interpretation (Historical Present), and in fact, independent distributional analyses provided clear evidence of the existence in Samaná English of a historical or narrative present tense (Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press), identical both in form and in function to its Standard English counterpart. The low rates of concord with 3rd p. sg. verbs in narrative clauses shown in Table 14 are likely due to the preponderance in this context, of *verba dicendi* (*say, tell*), which are particularly resistant to inflection (see also Schneider 1983). As mentioned earlier, these were excluded from the other calculations reported here[38].

7.4.3. Summary of individual effects

In sum, the factor-by-factor analyses presented above suggest that a number of factors condition the occurrence of verbal *-s*, only some of which have been attested previously, while other reported effects appear not to be operative at all in early Black English. First, contrary to any previous reports, we observe a small but consistent phonological condition on *-s* variability, manifested as a tendency toward preservation when *-s* is bisegmental and when it appears in non-consonantal environments. This effect has been widely attested in other studies of consonant deletion and cluster simplification, and appears to be operative in both concord and nonconcord contexts.

As far as the contribution of type of subject noun phrase is concerned, we observe on the one hand a tendency towards verbal inflection with heavy noun phrase (as opposed to pronominal) subjects, and on the other a tendency towards -Ø marking when the latter are indefinite. Both effects, attested in nonstandard white dialects and throughout the history of English, although never to our knowledge in VBE, are most robust in nonconcord contexts. Features of the verb also play a role. In contrast with earlier suggestions, we observe a tendency towards inflection in weak verbs denoting habitual (and not durative) aspect, which is strongest in 3rd p. sg. contexts. Finally, the two discourse factors reported to be operative in VBE — the sequence constraint and the association of *-s* with the narrative present — also have strong effects on *-s* usage in early Black English, but in the direction *opposite* to previous reports.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these results is the finding that *both* 3rd. p. sg. and nonconcord *-s* are subject to regular, parallel environmental conditioning, although certain effects seems to be stronger in one or the other of the contexts. Now, while tabulations of effects taken one at a time, such as those reported above, are informative, they do not reveal the *relative* importance of factor effects to each other, nor whether all are in fact significant when considered simultaneously. We thus reanalyze the data using the logistic regression procedures implemented in the variable rule program (Sankoff 1988) to estimate the true effects of phonological and syntactic factors on both concord and nonconcord *-s* usage, and to remove artifacts of poor data distribution, correlated factors, or statistical fluctuations. This will enable us to determine which environmental factors have a significant effect on *-s* insertion and deletion when all are considered together, as well as to estimate the magnitude of individual factor effects.

7.5. Multivariate analysis of the contribution of factors to verbal *-s* usage

Table 15 displays the results of a variable rule analysis of the factors contributing to the probability that verbal *-s* will be present in the Samaná data base[39]. Higher numbers can be interpreted as favouring *-s* inflection, while lower ones disfavour it. The higher the figure, the greater the contribution of that factor to *-s* marking. The factors are displayed with the most significant ones first, as determined by the regression procedure.

Table 15. Contribution of factors selected as significant to the presence of verbal *-s* in all grammatical persons (*-Ø → -s*) in Samaná English

Corrected mean: .30

Person/Number		Verbal Aspect		Definiteness of Subject	
3rd p.sg.	.77	Habitual/Iterative	.66	Definite	.54
3rd p. pl.	.54	Durative/Continuous	.44	Nondefinite	.41
1st p. sg.	.39	Punctual/Instantaneous	.42		
2nd p. sg.	.25				

Type of Subject		Underlying Phonetic Form	
Noun phrase + relative	.77	[əz]	.74
Noun phrase	.54	[s]	.51
Pronoun	.49	[z]	.47

Preceding Phonological Segment		Following Phonological Segment	
Vowel	.62	Vowel	.55
Consonant	.48	Pause	.53
		Consonant	.47

Factors not selected: none

The table shows that the greatest and most significant contribution to the presence of inflection is made by person and number of the subject: 3rd p. sg. subjects may be seen to favour *-s* marking more than any other factor examined, with a probability of .77. Third person plural subjects also show some tendency to favour marking. The fact that a preference (albeit weak) for nonconcordial marking persists in 3rd p. pl. as compared to other person numbers, is not surprising in view of the fact that historically, marking in this context is older, antedating concord in 3rd p. sg. (e.g. Curme 1977 and section (4.0) above). Verbal aspect is another important factor: inflection is favoured (at .66) only when the aspectual reading is habitual/iterative. Definite subjects, particularly when comprised of heavy NPs, also contribute to the probability of marking; the effect observed in Table 9 with regard to full vs. pronominal subjects appears quite reduced in this analysis (.54 vs. .49 respectively). Finally, the phonological effects cited above, though less

significant than those of the other factors, persist.

We observed in section (7.4.3) above that although the ranking of factor effects was generally parallel in concord and nonconcord contexts, certain factors assumed particular importance in specific grammatical persons. Amalgamating the data for all persons, as in the analysis depicted in Table 15, could have the result of averaging out the effect of a factor with, say, a heavy contribution in concord contexts and only a slight one elsewhere. We thus reanalyse the data according to whether or not they occurred in 3rd p. sg. contexts, adopting the methodology detailed in section (6.2) above.

Table 16 displays the factor weights associated with verbal *-s* presence in persons other than 3rd p. sg.

Table 16. Contribution of factors selected as significant to the presence of verbal *-s* in other than 3rd p. sg. contexts (-Ø → -*s*) in Samaná English.

Corrected mean: .22

Verbal Aspect		Definiteness of Subject	
Habitual/Iterative	.68	Definite	.56
Durative/Continuous	.44	Indefinite	.39
Punctual/Instantaneous	.39		
Type of Subject		**Preceding Phonological Segment**	
Noun phrase + relative	.91	Vowel	.62
Noun phrase	.67	Consonant	.48
Pronoun	.48		
Underlying Phonetic Form		**Following Phonological Segment**	
[ez]	.67	Pause	.60
[ɛ]	.53	Vowel	.55
[z]	.46	Consonant	.47

Factors not selected: none

The factor effects are essentially identical, although we observe the factor of type of subject to assume additional importance, with a clear difference between pronominal and full noun phrases, in the expected direction. The contribution of underlying phonetic form, on the other hand, is somewhat reduced. In Table 17, we compare the probabilities with which these same factors influence the deletion of 3rd p. sg. *-s*.

Table 17. Contribution of factors selected as significant to the deletion of 3rd p. sg. *-s* (*-s* → -Ø) in Samaná English.

Corrected mean:	.43		
Verbal Aspect		***Definiteness of Subject**	
Habitual/Iterative	.33	Definite	.49
Durative/Continuous	.56	Indefinite	.54
Punctual/Instantaneous	.57		
***Type of Subject**		***Preceding Phonological Segment**	
Noun phrase + relative	.32	Vowel	.43
Noun phrase	.51	Consonant	.51
Pronoun	.52		
Underlying Phonetic Form		***Following Phonological Segment**	
[ɐz]	.08	Pause	.57
[ɪ]	.56	Vowel	.45
[z]	.51	Consonant	.53

*Factors not selected by the multiple regression procedure.

The table shows that two of the factors found to affect the presence of nonconcord *-s* (verbal aspect and underlying phonetic form) contribute a significant effect to the probability that 3rd p. sg. will be marked as well. That some of the other factors were not retained by the stepwise regression analysis is clearly due to the relatively small sample of 3rd p. sg. tokens — only 604 vs. 1881 for the conconcord contexts. Thus the table displays an analysis where all factors are forced into the regression[40].

It is remarkable that the constraint ranking, or the order in which the factors constituting each group affect the process under consideration, is basically identical for the two analyses, i.e. for all grammatical persons[41]. The result that both "insertion" and "deletion" are conditioned by the same factors indicates that verbal *-s* marking is a unitary process, involving both concord and nonconcord contexts. We do note, however, that the magnitude of some of the effects (e.g. preceding phonological segment, definiteness of the subject, type of subject) is sharply reduced in 3rd p. sg., and the lack of statistical significance may also be partly due to the weaker differential conditioning of constrasting features.

8.0 Discussion

How can these results be explained? We have described in some detail why the scientific record with regard to the factors conditioning verbal *-s* variability in English — whether early or modern, Black or

White, British or American — does not permit an easy solution based on either historical or comparative grounds. However, the findings we have presented do allow the following plausible hypothesis.

In section (4.0) we detailed the pervasive variability of *-s* throughout the verbal paradigm, which persisted in English at least until the early 17th century. Since an affix which occurred variably on all grammatical persons was unlikely to have functioned (only, if at all) as an agreement marker, it is most probable that other linguistic factors (in addition to social and stylistic factors) conditioned its occurrence. The exact nature of such factors can no longer be unambiguously reconstructed, although the two that were mentioned in the historical texts have been shown to maintain an effect in early Black English. It would not be unreasonable to assume that those factors approximated the ones depicted in Tables 16 and 17 — at least before the resolution of *-s* variability into a 3rd p. sg. agreement marker; the person/number constraint displayed in Table 15 would have been incorporated thereafter. More specifically, the verbal inflection system brought by the British settlers to the Southern United States would have embodied the constraints on *-s* variability depicted in Tables 16 and 17, or alternatively, Table 15, depending on the time the tendency toward 3rd p. sg. *-s* agreement began to make inroads into the spoken language of the populace. Extrapolating from Schneider's (1983) suggestion, we hypothesize that the early slaves would have acquired this variable system, along with the constraints on its variability. This would be consistent with the major findings of this study, i.e. that 1) the expression of *nonconcord -s* is a result of regular variable conditioning, 2) the factors conditioning its occurrence are identical to those conditioning the occurrence of 3rd p. sg. *-s*, and 3) the grammaticalization of *-s* as the contemporary Standard English agreement marker (as expressed by the heavy contribution of the factor of 3rd p. sg. in Table 15) subsequently overrides quantitatively many of those conditioning effects in 3rd p. sg. contexts.

We have seen from Table 17 that there are only two strong constraints on 3rd p. sg. *-s* usage: a phonological one inhibiting deletion when *-s* is a bisegmental morpheme, and an aspectual one inhibiting deletion when the aspectual reading of the verb is habitual. The latter result, which has appeared consistently across the analyses presented here, inevitably raises the question of whether *-s* can be interpreted as an aspectual marker, thereby implying that it would be fulfilling a function which is somehow alien to English grammar. *-S* clearly does mark habitual aspect (more than durative and punctual aspects), but this function is not in contradiction with that of the present tense in Standard English or more generally. Comrie (1985:37) observes that the most characteristic use of the present tense is to refer to situations which occupy a longer period of time than the present moment, but which include the present moment within them, i.e. situations which can be construed as "habitual"). He defines the situation referred to by a Comrie (1985:37) observes that the most characteristic use of the present tense is to refer to situations which occupy a longer period of time than the present moment, but which include the present moment within them, i.e. situations which can be construed as "habitual"). He defines the situation referred to by a verb in the present tense as simply one which literally holds at the moment of speaking (ibid.:38). Whether or not this situation is part of a larger one extending into past or future time is an implicature which must be worked out on the basis of other features of the real world and of the sentence. Of these, Comrie characterizes sentential aspect as one of the most important in deciding whether the situation is restricted to

the present moment (punctual). We have already noted the fact that in many languages, including English, habitual aspectual meaning is in some sense *embodied* in the present tense. Comrie illustrates the special position of habitual meaning in tense-aspect-mood systems by observing that it is situated at the intersection of the three: it can be expected to be expressed by means of a tense, since it involves location of a situation across an extended segment of time, it can be aspectual since it refers to the internal temporal contour of a situation; but it can also be modal since it involves generalizations about possible worlds from observation of the actual world (ibid.:40). Indeed, since there apparently exists no separate habitual tense apart from the present, he observes that the grammatical expression of habituality will always be integrated into the aspectual or modal system rather than into the tense system. Thus, as we we remarked in section (3.0) above, there is no straightforward way of *distinguishing* a tense function from an aspectual function of *-s*, since the two are inextricably linked.

We are now in a position to return to the original question raised in this paper: that of the origin and function of verbal *-s* in early Black English. We begin by reviewing the available evidence for the status of *-s* as an intrusion vs. an integral part of early Black English grammar. Recall that the arguments marshalled in favour of the status of *-s* as a hypercorrect intrusion (in contemporary VBE) rest on three premises: 1) *-s* is frequently absent in concord contexts, 2) *-s* is frequently inserted in other persons, as well as in non-finite forms, and 3) *-s* absence is not subject to regular phonological conditioning. We address each of these in turn.

First, we have shown that while 3rd p. sg. subject-verb agreement is far from categorical in either data set on early Black English, it is present in this environment at least half (in the Ex-Slave Recordings, more than 2/3) of the time. More important, arguments against standard English origins based on variable inflection rates cannot be considered fully convincing when we take into account that the frequencies (of non-standard deletion *and* non-standard insertion) are in fact lower than those attested for the few local British (Trudgill 1974, Cheshire 1982) and American (Bailey p.c.) white dialects which have been systematically studied; no one has suggested that verbal *-s* is not an integral part of these white dialects.

Finally, our study demonstrated that at least at an earlier stage of Black English, *-s* variability showed regular phonological conditioning (also detectable in Fasold's 1972 Washington data), in the expected direction. This conditioning, although clearly apparent in all contexts in the individual factor analysis, was largely overridden in 3rd p. sg. by the strength of the standard concord rule.

This paper has also demonstrated that, contrary to what would be expected from hypercorrect on, *nonconcord -s* presence is also subject to regular conditioning (over and above the phonological), identical to that obtaining for concord *-s*. Based on our finding that two of the constraints reported throughout the history of English are operative in early Black English, we suggested that this pattern might be a synchronic reflex of the constraint ranking in the varieties of English which provided the linguistic model for the slaves. Given the difficulty of reconstructing the conditioning of a variable process which has now basically gone to completion, this suggestion remains speculative.

But whether or not the scenario we have outlined actually accounts for the facts of earlier White English does not weaken our finding that verbal *-s* marking within the early Black English systems we have examined is not random hypercorrection. The behaviour we have described represents a stage of the language in which a concord function for *-s* has already made a certain amount of progress in supplanting whatever earlier functions it might have had. We thus conclude that verbal *-s*, as well as the present tense, formed an integral part of the early Black English grammar. Further support in favour of this conclusion may be adduced from the behaviour of the individuals we have studied. We have already had occasion to observe the surprising degree of inter-speaker consistency (where the data permit comparison) on the ranking of constraints. Fasold (1972:146) had hypothesized that if *-s* insertion in nonconcord contexts and 3rd p. sg. *-s* absence were to be taken together as evidence for the absence of *-s* from the underlying grammar, then it ought to be the case that individuals who show most "hypercorrection" should be precisely those with least 3rd p. sg. *-s* presence. Table 18 shows no such relationship between the tendency toward lack of concord in 3rd p. sg. and *-s* insertion elsewhere among our Samaná informants. On the contrary, we observe a highly significant ($p < .001$) correlation (coefficient = .667) between concord and nonconcord contexts, such that speakers with high rates of *-s* marking in one show parallel rates in the other, and conversely. Our speaker sample is thus constituted of two types of individual: those who tend to mark *-s* and those who do not, regardless of grammatical person.

Table 18. Rates of concord *-s* absence vs. nonconcord *-s* presence by individual (Samaná speakers)[42]

Speaker #	concord *-s* absence		*-s* presence in nonconcord contexts	
	% Ø	N	% [*-s*]	N
07	87	55	11	198
21	78	9	10	44
11	71	21	8	89
05	67	42	18	73
01	64	22	18	107
10	55	22	20	66
08	53	17	39	36
04	53	30	0	23
14	44	27	23	100
03	38	92	14	231
18	33	42	30	126
19	31	39	34	161
17	28	25	17	48
02	26	58	21	222
09	22	27	33	51
06	25	32	27	108
15	18	11	48	23
16	17	29	44	108

Our suggestion that variability in *-s* marking was acquired as an inherent part of the language as a whole receives strongest support from an examination of the contribution of extra-linguistic factors to its

occurrence. The only extra-linguistic factor found to exert a consistent effect on *-s* usage in Samaná is access to formal instruction (Table 19).

Table 19. The Effect of Education on *-s* Usage

Some Formal Education	Concord *-s* presence		Nonconcord *-s* presence	
	% [*-s*]	N	% [*-s*]	N
Speaker #				
16*	83	29	44	108
15	82	11	48	23
09*	78	27	33	51
06*	75	32	27	108
02	74	58	21	222
17	72	25	17	48
19*	69	39	34	161
18*	67	42	30	126
03*	62	92	14	231
14	56	27	23	100
Mean	71.8		Mean	29.1
No Formal Education	**Concord *-s* presence**		**Nonconcord *-s* presence**	
	% [*-s*]	N	% [*-s*]	N
Speaker #				
04	47	30	0	23
08	47	17	39	36
10	45	22	20	66
01	36	22	18	107
05	33	42	18	73
11*	29	21	8	89
21	22	9	11	44
07	13	55	11	198
Mean	41.0		Mean	15.6

*Individuals connected with church activities

Contrary to expectation, individuals who have had any schooling at all, and who are closely connected with church activities, are precisely the ones with most verbal *-s* presence in *both* concord and nonconcord contexts. This suggests that *-s* usage was a prestige marker in the dialect at an earlier point in time, as would be expected if it were associated with the speech of the white masters (whatever its affect in their variety), and that its ulterior movement towards an indicator of nonstandard speech in non-concord contexts had not penetrated the language of the ancestors of the Samaná informants by the time they sailed for the Dominican Republic in 1824. Their subsequent lack of contact with other standardizing influences (Poplack and Sankoff 1987) explains the contemporary pattern.

In sum, the facts we have presented here concerning the linguistic and extralinguistic conditioning of verbal *-s* usage all militate in favour of the suggestion that present-tense marking via verbal *-s* was an integral part of the early Black English grammar. This process was variable, but not random, and may well have reflected synchronic variability in the input language at the time of acquisition. The reasons for its disappearance, if it has indeed disappeared from contemporary VBE, must remain an open question.

NOTES:

* We would like to thank Guy Bailey, whose cooperation with this project has far exceeded the call of duty, as well as Don Hindle, Bill Labov and David Sankoff, for reading and commenting on this work.

1 The Samaná English data contained only seven instances of 2nd p. pl. in a present context, none of which occurred with *-s* , and the Ex-Slave Recordings, only one. Given the paucity of data in the Ex-Slave Recordings overall, there is not always an illustrative example for each context.

2 The numbered codes in parentheses refer to the speaker and line number in the Samaná corpus. ESR designates the Ex-Slave Recordings and the initials identify the speaker.

3 The two sole instances of [*-s*] in 1st p. pl. in the Ex-Slave Recordings occur in this direct quotation of JM's white masters.

4 Note, however, that Labov refers only to adolescent and pre-adolescent speech here. With the exception of his southern-raised lower working class adults in casual style, the inflected verb form predominates among the adults he studied (Labov et al. 1968:161-2).

5 Labov (1987:8) observes that *-s* is involved in "radical" style-shifting.

6 *-S* variability in persons other than 3rd p. sg. is variously referred to in the literature as hyper-*s*, hyper-*z*, and nonconcord *-s*.

7 Though Brewer cites 18th and 19th century British dialects as the source of nonconcord *-s*, she does not specifically address the issue of the origin of its use as a durative aspectual marker in early Black English.

8 This possibility is at least implicitly endorsed by Bickerton (1975) and Roberts (1976) as well.

9 Presumably on the basis of the earlier studies by Labov et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969) and Fasold (1972).

10 This figure is for Schneider's amalgamated data.

11 Such spurious comparisons can easily be discarded when detected. More puzzling is the discrepancy between the studies in marking rates of the 3rd p. sg. verbs, for which Brewer *did* calculate the proportion of *-s* out of all inflected and uninflected forms:

% of *-s* marking on 3rd p. sg. verbs in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives (*-s*/*-s* + -Ø)

	South Carolina	Texas
Brewer 1986	7.0%	43.8%
Schneider 1983	70.5%	75.0%

Whether the incongruity stems from the data base or other factors remains an open question. It was not addressed in the later paper.

12 These were extracted from a corpus of casual conversations with white middle-class Canadians recorded by Tagliamonte in 1982.

13 The only example containing both inflected and uninflected verbs provided by Roberts (1976:9) in support of his claim for a habitual function of *-s* shows exactly the same pattern: *both* the *-s* marked (in italics) and the -Ø marked (in bold face) verbs denote habitual/iterative aspect:

> Well, when I **cuss** Master Ed, I *goes* 'way down in the bottoms where the corn **grow** high ... I *looks* east and west ... I see no Master Ed. Then I *pitches* into him and *gives* him the worst cussing ... Then when I *goes* back my feeling is satisfied ..

14 Perhaps this "tense-z" corresponds to what we and others have analyzed as historical present, and Myhill and Harris, as narrative present.

15 Holmqvist (1922:2) suggests that it may simply be an analogical extension from 2nd p. sg. which ended in *-s* in Old English and other Germanic languages.

16 The (s) has been added to the table by us to reflect Mossé's observation in a footnote to his table that "in the Northern dialect the *-s* ending is gradually extended to the 1st p. sg. of the present indicative" (p.79), see also Wright (1905:175-6), Curme (1977:53), Wakelin (1977:119).

17 The reasons for this rather unusual development have not been treated in any work on the history of English which we have consulted: 3rd p. sg. is considered the most basic form, on which the morphology of the other person forms of a tense is modelled (e.g. Bybee and Brewer 1980). Manczak (1963:36) has suggested that the persistence of *-s* on 3rd p. sg. can be accounted for by his "hypotheses XIII and XIV": that the roots and endings of the third person and of the singular undergo fewer analogical changes than those of other persons and numbers.

18 Trudgill (1974) only provides data on the social and stylistic conditioning of *-s* occurrence.

19 For the relationship of Samaná English to early American Black English, see Poplack and Sankoff 1983, 1987; Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press. These references also provide details of sample selection and corpus constitution.

20 The analyses we report of the Ex-Slave Recordings are based on data extracted from high-quality, reel-to-reel copies of the original Library of Congress tapes, kindly made available to us by Guy Bailey, and not from the transcripts or the cassettes.

21 The majority of the Ex-Slave informants (8/11) had 25 potential contexts for verbal *-s* or less per person.

22 With the exception of 2nd p. pl., for which there were sparse data in both corpora; see fn. 2 above. This context was excluded from further analysis.

23 An obvious exception is that of present-tense verbs in complicating action clauses of narratives, which, by virtue of their occurrence in these contexts, have past temporal reference. Because expression of historical present falls within the standard uses of the English present tense, such forms were necessarily retained in our data base. It is only when these verbs are regular (weak) that an unavoidable ambiguity arises as to whether their uninflected form results from deletion of present- or past-tense inflections (For more detailed treatment of this problem, see Tagliamonte and Poplack, in press: 5-6). In this study, however, verbs in narrative clauses only represent approximately 15% of the data (Table 14), and of these, less than a quarter fall into the regular category (ibid: Table 1). We thus estimate the

number of verbs in the data set which are truly ambiguous as to past- or present-tense inflection to be under 4%. Compare Myhill and Harris (1986:29), who include regular past-tense verbs in the variable environment for *-s*. Additional motivation for excluding past-reference contexts from analysis comes from the fact that *-s* inflection here was virtually non-existent in our data (v. also section (7.4.2), especially Table 14).

[24] Only 20 examples of "invariant" *be* occurred in the Samaná corpus, half of which were inflected with *-s*. Instances of inflection on other non-finite verbs were very infrequent (N=10) in these data, and, with one exception, non-existent in the Ex-Slave Recordings. Finite forms of *be* were also excluded from our study, both because of its suppletive present-tense forms which may have been acquired independently, and because widespread deletion of the copula by an independent process (Poplack and Sankoff 1987) makes concord impossible to determine in many cases. Finite forms of *have* were also excluded, following Fasold (1972).

[25] This is in contrast to Labov et al. 1968:166 who found that the verb *got* in Nonstandard Negro English showed a high concentration of "hyper-s" in 3rd p. sg. as well as other persons.

[26] Productive uses of these verbs were retained in the analysis, e.g. *But that I tells people sometime* (03/1258).

[27] Indeed, given the fact that only two variants are treated, figures for the alternate analysis may be obtained simply by subtracting the ones provided from 1.

[28] Parentheses indicate sparse data.

[29] In Washington only 13% of the time.

[30] The extremely low rate of verbal *-s* usage in the Ex-Slave Recordings (42 cases in all) is not a reflection of generalized absence of this consonant in the data. Though we have not yet examined this systematically, *-s* is apparently used freely in plurals. In view of the distribution in Table 6, we are unsure of how to interpret Holm's (to appear) remark that "the use of the uninflected verb for the present tense ... predominates in the language of each speaker" in the corpus, unless he is referring to persons other than third, since we have seen that 3rd p. sg. verbs are in fact *inflected* 71% of the time. If this is the case, can lack of inflection in non-3rd p. sg. contexts – the norm in most contemporary dialects of English – be appropriately characterized as an apparent remnant of an earlier English-based creole (ibid.)?

[31] Of course *-s* is also most likely to occur with 3rd p. sg. in Detroit and Washington, but at substantially lower rates. It is nonetheless the case that Wolfram (1969:133) reports up to 43% 3rd p sg. *-s* in Upper Working Class speech. It is also of interest that the rate of retention of 3rd p. sg. *-s* in Samaná exactly parallels that found by Bailey in contemporary Southern white folk speech: 57% (Bailey p.c.).

[32] Occurrences of this context in the Ex-Slave Narratives are too rare to permit analysis.

[33] Of the eight contrasts between vocalic and consonantal effects in Table 8, there are enough data and enough of a difference so that one is significant at the 0.01 level and three more are significant at the 0.1 level (using a χ^2 test with continuity correction).

[34] The phonological effect found in the Washington phonological sequence data is actually quite strong; as in Samaná, an intervocalic environment clearly promotes retention of *-s*.

3rd p. sg. -s absence by surrounding phonological sequence

	V__#V	V__#C	C__#V	C__#C
	% Ø	% Ø	% Ø	% Ø
Detroit	61.8	72.2	67.4	62.4
Washington	50.8	72.9	64.2	65.5
Samaná	31.4	36.0	41.6	48.1

Given these findings, it is unclear why Fasold was so categorical in rejecting the possibility that verbal *-s* could be phonologically conditioned.

35 Although not reported, a (slight) preference for inflecting verbs with full noun phrase subjects is also observable in Myhill and Harris' (1986) VBE data: 14.9% vs. 9.6% marking for pronominal subjects (abstracted from Table 2, p. 27).

36 The Ex-Slave Recordings contain no structured narratives to speak of, and could not be analyzed in this way.

37 These figures are taken from a gross data tabulation of all potential present-tense examples from the entire body of narrative and non-narrative discourse. In subsequent analyses many of these contexts were eliminated in accordance with the criteria outlined in section (6.1).

38 There is ample evidence to support the unique behaviour of *verba dicendi* in narrative style in general. Johnstone (1985:18) suggests that in stories these function as "semantically neutral place markers, indicating only that what follows is supposed to be taken as someone's exact words". Vincent (1983) showed that in Montreal French narratives, *il dit, je dis*, etc. function as discourse particles, replacing others like *tu sais, n'est-ce pas*, which occur in non-narrative contexts. In the Samaná narratives, 3rd p. sg. *sayØ* is nearly categorical.

39 The data contained in the Ex-Slave Recordings are too sparse to permit multivariate analysis.

40 The two significant factor groups show essentially the same values with or without the presence of the other factor groups. Two others, following phonological environment and type of subject, were almost significant at the .05 level.

41 Recall that Tables 16 and 17 depict analyses with different underlying forms, so that a factor with a heavy contribution to "insertion" will show up as contributing a small one to "deletion".

42 Only 18 of the 21 speakers are considered here because the remainder had sparse data.

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