In his article "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula" ("Language," 1969, William Labov asserts that the affinities of Black English (BE) with Standard English (SE) are evidenced by the fact that BE copula deletion occurs in those positions where SE copula contraction may occur. This paper examines the conclusions reached by other scholars that BE's affinities are more with Creole languages than with SE, and considers the copula in several Creoles (West African Pidgin, Gullah, and Haitian Creole) in order to determine the extent to which copula absence can be taken as evidence of the Creole nature of BE. The author finds evidence to support both sides of the argument, nor does he find the two positions incompatible. He concludes, however, after an examination of Hebrew, a copula-less language unrelated to the other languages in question, that the copula positions examined by Labov (past tense, clause final, and following a verb or auxiliary) "have some sort of inter-language importance to copulas in that funny things happen in these positions," and sees this fact as limiting the extent to which comparative studies of the copula in Creole languages can support or weaken either side of the argument. (FWR)
CREOLES AND COPULAS

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In his important article, "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula," William Labov notes that the copula in Black English (Labov's Negro Non Standard) may be deleted, with a list of exceptions, in just those positions where the copula may be contracted in Standard English; that is, everywhere but in the past tense, in clause final position, and immediately following another verb or auxiliary. Thus:

(1) John a teacher.

but

(2) John was a teacher.
(3) I know what John is.
(4) John may be a teacher.
(5) John wants to be a teacher.

From these facts Labov is able to treat copula deletion as an extension of Standard English copula contraction.

Labov's argument seems unassailable as long as consideration is limited to Standard English and Black English. However, there is a sizeable body of opinion which holds that Black English's affinities are more with Creole languages than with Standard English. In this paper I will consider the copula in several Creoles in an attempt to determine the extent to which copula absence can be taken as evidence of the Creole nature of Black English. To this end I will especially
consider the forms of the copula in two of the positions where Labov found an explicit copula; clause finally and following an auxiliary or another verb. For brevity's sake I will term these "Labov positions."

West African Pidgin uses a distressingly large number of forms where Standard English uses the copula. With predicate nominatives it uses [bi]4:

(6) yan i bi tika 'John is a teacher.'

with locatives and progressives it uses [ ]6

(7) yan de fo akr 'John is in Accra.'
(8) yan de syl 'John is singing.'

while with predicate adjectives there is no explicit copula.

(9) yan to 'John is tall.'

However, these disparate copulas fall together, as least somewhat, in the positions Labov considered. Thus:

(10) yan go bi tika 'John will be a teacher.'
(11) yan go bi fe gana 'John will be in Ghana.'
(12) yan go bi gbad 'John will be happy.'
(13) yan no kleva layk tink bi 'John is not as smart as he thinks he is,'

even though there also exist sentences like

(14) yan no de fo gana layk tink i de 'John is not in Ghana like she thinks he is.'

and
the basic situation seems to be that the single form [b:] in the Labov positions alternates with a variety of forms in other positions. Considering the situation as a problem of synchronic West African Pidgin syntax I can find no non-\textit{ad hoc} explanation for these facts. Considering West African Pidgin in the light of Black English there is a seductive parallelism... Both have a form of the copula 'be' which appears in Labov positions, alternating with other elements in other positions. Obviously the parallelism is far from complete, but it is close enough to be suggestive.

Although the morphemes involved differ a bit (principally in the use of [ð] instead of [b] when followed by a Noun-phrase) the pattern of alternation in Old-fashined Rural Gullah is essentially identical with that of West African Pidgin. I therefore will only note that everything I asserted about West African Pidgin seems to hold for Gullah.

A different situation holds for Haitian Creole. In most sentences there is no copula.

(16) \textit{se profes} 'John is a teacher.'

(17) \textit{ro} 'John is tall.'

(18) \textit{prin} 'John is in Port-au-Prince.'

while in clause final position, the copula [ye] (French \textit{est}) appears just as 'be' does in Black English.

(19) \textit{pa pi gro} \textit{kə}

\textit{marc kwe} 'ye

as Mary believes he is.'

(20) \textit{kan} \textit{kote ye}

'I know where John is.'
although [ye] does not appear after other verbs

(21)  \[ \text{mari Kwe} \text{ye} \quad \text{John is not a} \\
     \text{professor as Mary believes he is.} \]

(22)  \[ \text{ye} \text{A gō\r  t\i\'} \text{\ l\i\'a} \text{\ a} \quad \text{John will be big when} \\
     \text{he is ten years old.} \]

(23)  \[ \text{ye} \text{A prof\e\s\s\s\i\'} \text{\ l\i\'a} \text{\ i} \quad \text{John will be a} \\
     \text{teacher when he finishes his class.} \]

A possible explanation for these facts may be found in two features

of Haitian Creole discussed by Goodman (1964). First, Goodman notes
(p. 60) that there is a short list class of Haitian Creole verbs, exem-
plified by vini, which retain their final vowel only in clause or sen-
tence final position. Second, Goodman (p. 59) states that a semivowel
is regularly inserted initially in monosyllabic words beginning with a
vowel and that this is the origin of the \[ y \] or \[ ye \]. Now if \[ ye \] is
a member of the vini class of verbs and if the rule inserting the semi-
vowel follows the rule deleting the final vowel of this class of verbs
then the observed distribution of \[ ye \] is accounted for by independently
motivated phonological rules.

At this point there is something for everybody; believers in the
Creole affinities of Black English can point to the strong similari-
ties in copula distribution between Black English and Haitian Creole and
the phonological nature of copula deletion in each language, while un-
believers can point to the completely different phonological rules used
in each language.

Before drawing my own conclusions, I would like to consider
another copulaless language, \[ \text{Hebrew} \], which is clearly unrelated to any
of the other languages I have discussed. The situation is strangely
familiar. There are no copulas in simple declarative sentences

\[ \text{The man is big.} \]

(24) \( \text{The man is big.} \)

(25) \( \text{The man is a teacher.} \)

but a copula appears after verbs

\[ \text{The man wants to be big.} \]

(26) \( \text{The man wants to be big.} \)

(27) \( \text{The man wants to be a teacher.} \)

I could elicit no sentences with the copula in final position but this is probably due to the fact that Hebrew is a VSO language.

The Hebrew sentences feed a growing suspicion that Labov positions have a language independent importance for copula deletion or insertion. A second point which I will just mention is the use of a repeated noun-phrase as the subject of equative sentences, though not with predicate adjectives. Although neither

\[ \text{The man is big.} \]

(28) \( \text{The man is big.} \)

nor

\[ \text{The man is a teacher.} \]

(29) \( \text{The man is a teacher.} \)

is wholly ungrammatical, speakers of Hebrew show a definite tendency to prefer (24) and (25) to (28) and (29). This correlates interestingly with Haitian Creole where (16) and (17) are possible (reproduced here for convenience)

\[ \text{John is a professor.} \]

(16) \( \text{John is a professor.} \)
From all of the above I would like to suggest the following, timid, conclusions.

I. What I have referred to as Labov positions, clause final and following a verb or an auxiliary, have some sort of inter-language importance to copulas in that funny things happen to copulas in these positions.

II. Because of I, Labov's findings lose some force as an argument against the Creole nature of Black English; (it should be noted that this is not an argument made by Labov.) i.e., since funny things happen to copulas in Labov positions it is not too wild a coincidence that Black English cannot delete in these positions and Standard English cannot contract in them.

III. Similarly some force is removed from arguments for Creole affinities of Black English based on the similarity between Haitian Creole and Black English use of the copula.

IV. Labov (1969) describes Black English use of the copula in terms of a sociolinguistic system including Standard English. Stewart (1969) shows how the present use of the copula in Black English developed from a Creole system. These positions are not incompatible. More sadly, conclusion I seems to minimize the extent to which comparative studies of the copula in Creole languages can support or weaken either Stewart's or Labov's position.
NOTES

1) In preparing this paper, I have benefitted from discussions with R.M.R. and B.L. Hall, Bill Stewart, Walt Wolfram, Ed Fasold, Roger Shuy, and Beryl Bailey.

2) See for instance Dillard (undated) and Stewart (1969).

3) Ferguson (1968:3) states that languages without copulas in the present tense generally have them in other tenses. I believe this is true if Ferguson means inflected tenses and thus I haven't considered past tense situations.

4) The West African Pidgin sentences were supplied by Professor Kofi Awooner.

5) For sentences in West African Pidgin I use a rough phonetic transcription.

6) In certain dialects of West African Pidgin [kɔ] is used only for locatives while [dɔ] is used for progressives.

7) I am indebted to William Stewart for this term as well as for the data on which my conclusions are based.

8) The Haitian Creole sentences discussed here were collected by Mike and Beatrice Hall.

9) [sɛ] is, at least stylistically, Frech c'est.

10) By this time it should be clear that "copulaless" is a relative, not absolute, term.
### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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