

Copula Variation in Southern Illinois White Vernacular English

In certain dialects of American English the *be* verb forms do not behave as in Standard American English-- either by creating new uses for a *be* verb, or by deviating from the standard paradigm in standard uses. For example, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) varieties show the 'habitual-*be*' and zero-copula forms (Green 2002, Rickford 1996), but little work has been done on white vernacular *be* forms. Montgomery & Mishoe (1999) describe a *be* form in white vernacular in the Carolinas that is similar to AAVE habitual-*be*, and Dannenberg (1999) notes that zero-copula forms occur in white varieties, but are usually restricted to deletion of *are* forms. This study looks at *be* forms in the white vernacular English spoken in Southern Illinois (SoIVE). The goal is both to provide data of the *be* forms occurring in SoIVE and to examine the syntactic properties of these forms, especially in relation to current analyses and theories regarding *be* forms in AAVE.

For example, in SoIVE, zero-copula can occur in *is* (1) environments, and there is a second *be* form with an habitual sense (2, 3):

- (1) The preacher comin with us?
"Is the preacher coming with us?"
- (2) Nikki always bes on time.
"Nikki is always on time."
- (3) Either he doesn't be stoned, or he doesn't be my boyfriend.
"Either he stops being/getting stoned all the time,
or he won't be my boyfriend"

I propose that there are at least two *be* form verbs in SoIVE. First is the copula/auxiliary *be* which can alternate with a zero form. Second is the habitual-like *be* which, unlike the AAVE habitual-*be*, is inflected in SoIVE and is acting as a main verb. This presentation, then, will explore the syntactic possibilities of these forms and provide a further piece of the dialectological puzzle of Southern Illinois.