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.