

For more than 80 years, the development of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been the subject of fierce debate. Long-standing controversy about whether AAVE's features come from English settler dialects (the Anglicist position) or show evidence of creole influence (the Creolist position) has been joined more recently by the provocative claim that AAVE is a creation of the 20th century, an instance of linguistic divergence fuelled by unprecedented social segregation as Blacks migrated to the urban North and West. It has been suggested, indeed, that there should be a consensus on the correctness of the Anglicist and divergence positions, based on the quantitative and sociohistorical work of the "Ottawa school," as represented, for instance, in Poplack's edited volume, *The English History of African American English* (2000), or in Poplack and Tagliamonte's *African American English in the Diaspora* (2001).

In this paper, I first characterize the development of this debate as falling into three primary phases, over eighty years, and then argue for continued research and debate rather than premature consensus. My challenge is based in part on limitations in the quantitative (including VARBRUL) linguistic evidence presented by the Anglicists for such features as plural absence, auxiliary non-inversion in question formation, and relativization (using that, what, zero and other forms), which I shall discuss in detail. The data come from "Early African American English" (including African Nova Scotia English, Samana English, and the Ex-Slave Recordings), Liberian Settler English, and various pidgins and creoles (including Nigerian Pidgin English, Jamaican Creole, Barbadian and Guyanese creole, some of it newly extracted and analyzed by me), and other varieties (including Early Modern English).

My challenge is also based on questions about the sociohistorical argumentation that Anglicists and "divergencists" introduce in support of their contentions. In particular, social segregation, cultural differentiation, and oppositional identities between Blacks and Whites seem to have been marked enough in earlier times to have created and/or maintained linguistic differences between these ethnic groups long before the dawn of the twentieth century.