

Double Negation in African American Vernacular English and in Standard English:

Evidence from Intonation, the History of English and Sociolinguistics

VLS01(04-07-06)

The Ban on Double Negation: A Form of Prescriptivism?

- (1) a. ?This theory *ain't* make *no* sense.
b. //doesn't make *no* sense.
c. This theory *doesn't* make *any* sense.
- (1a, b) Negative Concord (NC) characterizes African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other nonstandard varieties.
- (1c) Simple negation in Standard English (SE)

Three Central Questions:

1. How can the distribution of NC in AAVE be described?
2. How can we distinguish between NC and logical double negation?
3. What are the roots of NC in AAVE?

Structure of This Talk

1. The distribution of NC and the *Allomorph Hypothesis*.
2. NC and logical double negation occur with different intonational patterns which influence their respective interpretations.
3. Origins of NC in AAVE: Arguments for the *Variationist Hypothesis*.

1 Negation in AAVE and in Standard English (SE)

1.1 Negative Concord in AAVE

Definition:

The term negative concord stems from Mathesius (1937) and describes cases where two or more forms of negation are used to express a single negation in the sentence.

Types of Negative Concord

Type 1:

NC occurs between the auxiliary and the post-verbal negative indefinite (N-word) of a sentence.

- (2) a. John *ain't* got *no* money. (AAVE)
b. John *doesn't* have *any* money. (SE)
'John hat kein Geld'

N-words: *nobody, nothing, nowhere* and *no* money

A-words: *anybody, anything, anywhere* and *any* money

Types of Negative Concord

Type 2:

NC between the preverbal N-word and the auxiliary within one sentence.

- (3) a. *Nobody* around here *ain't* heard of him. (AAVE)
b. *Nobody* around here has heard of him. (SE)
'Niemand hier hat von ihm gehört'

Types of Negative Concord

Type 3:

NC between the auxiliary in the matrix clause and the N-words in the embedded clause.

- (4) a. He *ain't* say (that) *nobody* was eating with *no* college president. (AAVE)
b. He *didn't* say that *anybody* was eating with *any* college president. (SE)
'Er hat nicht gesagt, dass irgendjemand mit einem College-Präsidenten gegessen hätte'

Negative Inversion

- (5) a. *Ain't nobody done nothing.* (AAVE)
b. *Nobody has done anything.* (SE)
'Es hat niemand irgendetwas getan'

Do the negation patterns of AAVE and SE
characterize two different or two related languages?

1.2 The Allomorph Hypothesis

(6) N-words and A-words are morphological variants in the scope of negation.

(cf. von Stechow 1992, Ladusaw 1992, Martin 1996, Weiß 2002)

Two Arguments for the Allomorph Hypothesis

1. Mixed distribution argument

- (7) Ain't nobody ever thought about picking up nothing. (AAVE)
'Nobody ever thought about picking up anything ' (SE)
(Labov 1972: 785)

Two Arguments for the Allomorph Hypothesis

2. Scope argument

A negative element must precede the N- or A-words.

- (8) a. *I think it makes *any* sense. (SE)
b. ?I think it makes *no* sense. (AAVE)

- (9) a. I think it *doesn't* make *any* sense. (SE)
b. I think it *don't* make *no* sense. (AAVE)

Scope Argument

Negative attraction to the subject position in SE and AAVE

- (10) a. *Anybody ain't got no money. (AAVE)
b. *Anybody doesn't have any money. (SE)
'Jeder hat kein Geld'

- (11) a. Nobody got no money. (AAVE)
b. Nobody has any money. (SE)

Conclusion of Section 1:

- 1. Negation in AAVE is a rule-governed system.**
- 2. The relation between AAVE and SE can best be described by the allomorph hypothesis.**

However, the allomorph hypothesis must still be sharpened in order to account for variation within AAVE dialects.

2 NC vs. Logical Double Negation (LDN)

Results of a Questionnaire (Carden 1972)

- (12) a. This theory doesn't make no sense.
b. It is not the case that this theory makes no sense. (SE)
c. It is not the case that this theory makes sense. (AAVE)

- (13) The logical law of double negation:

$$\neg (\neg \alpha) = \alpha$$

Bishop Lowth's Dictum

- (14) "Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative."
(Bishop Lowth 1762: 126)
- (15) It is natural in early forms of language to strengthen the negative ... but as the users of a language grow more logical they come to feel that doubling a negative in a sentence is negating a negation and there that it is not correct except in the rare cases where it is desired to express such a round-about affirmative. (No one who is not familiar with it...).
(Earle et al. 1911: 54)

Pullum (1999)

"African American Vernacular English Is Not Standard English with Mistakes"

- (16) "AAVE turns out to be like Italian with regard to negative concord, not like Standard English. ...Neither AAVE nor Italian is illogical; it is just that their grammatical rules for expression of indefinites in negated clauses differ from the rules for Standard English." (Pullum 1999: 49)**

LDN occurs in SE and Nonstandard English:

- (17) Huey: "NOBODY talks about my mother."
Michael: "Well, I'm *NOT nobody*; I'm *SOMEbody*."
(Labov 1972: 816) (AAVE)

Question:

How can speakers of nonstandard dialects distinguish between NC and LDN?

- (18) When an underlying double negative is intended, speakers of non-standard dialects use the same device as speakers of SE – heavy stress on both negatives. (Labov 1972: 784)

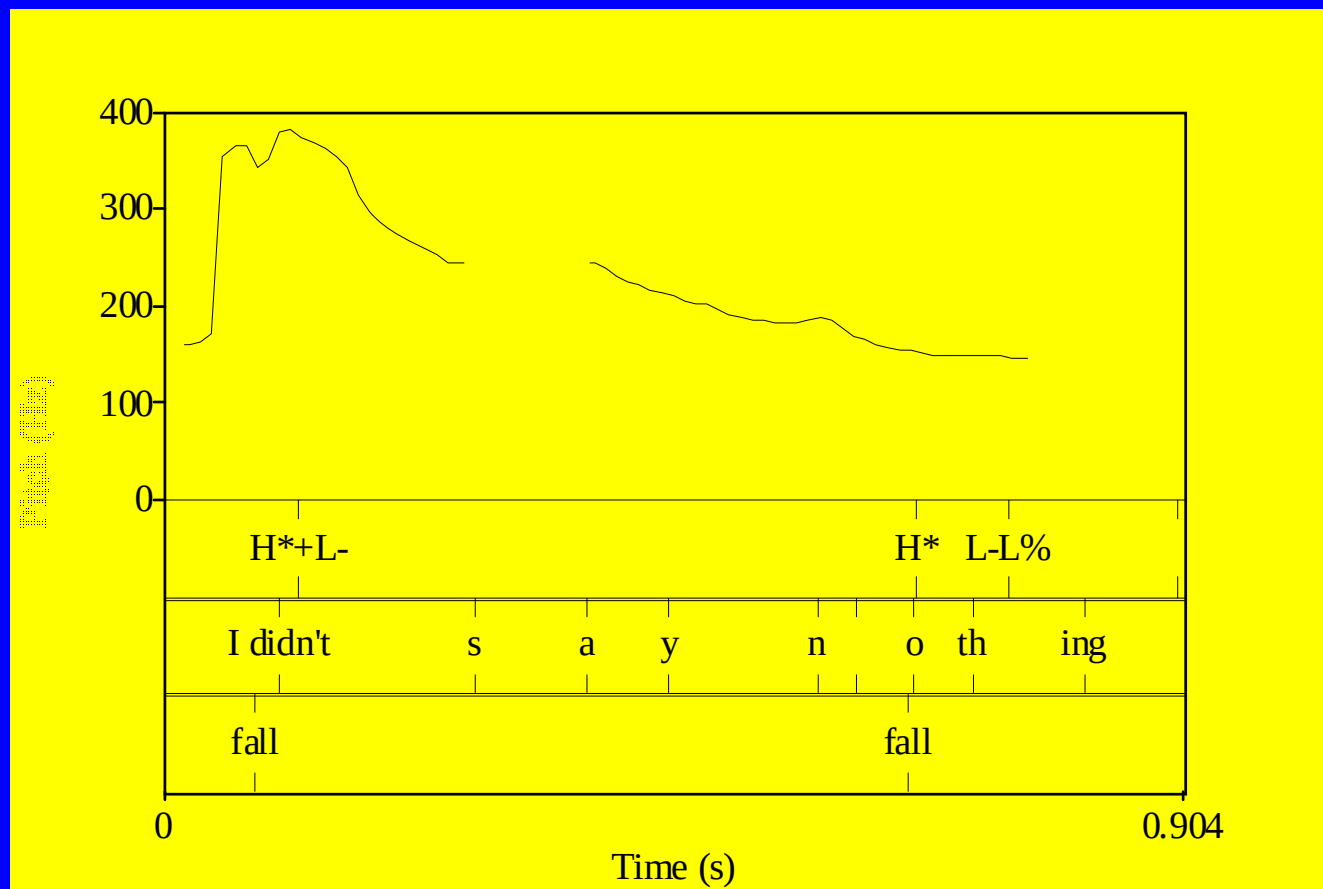
2.2 Intonational Disambiguation

(19) I didn't say nothing.

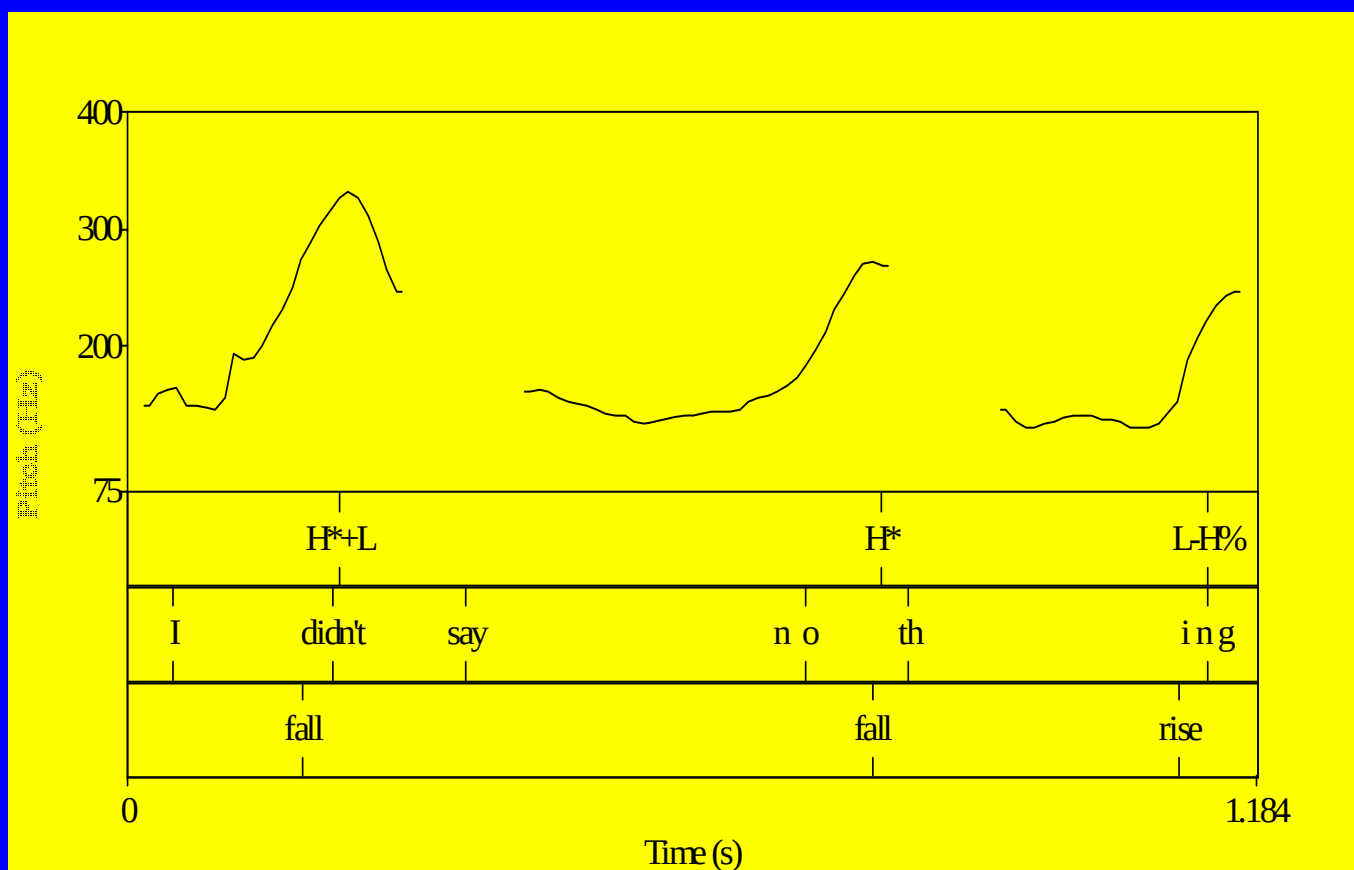
 (20) NC: A: What did you say to make him so angry?
B: I didn't say *nothing* (– I just sat there.)
 'I didn't say anything'

 (21) LDN: A: Why did you just sit there and not say anything?
 B: I *didn't* say *nothing*.
'Ich habe nicht nichts gesagt'

(22) The NC reading: sentence focus contour



(23) The LDN reading: contrast contour



Midway Conclusion

I have shown on the basis of intonational data that potentially ambiguous sentences with two negative elements can be intonationally disambiguated. NC is signaled by a fall on both negative elements, while LDN is signaled by a fall-rise on the N-word.

3 The Roots of Negative Concord in African American English

Two basically different approaches to this question:

- 1. The Creole origin hypothesis**
- 2. The variationist perspective**

Evidence from three different sources supports the variationist perspective: the history of English, intonation and sociolinguistics.

3.1 The Historical Argument

- **Claim: The pattern of negation in AAVE does not constitute an exception in the history of English.**

(24) The Jespersen Cycle:

The history of negative expressions in various languages makes us witness the following curious fluctuation: the original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in its turn may be felt as the negative proper and may then in the course of time be subject to the same development as the original word. (cf. Jespersen 1917: 4)

Application of the Jespersen Cycle to English

- (25) a. stage 1: OE: Ic ne secge.
'I don't speak'
- b. stage 2: ME: I ne seye not.
- c. stage 3: EME: I say not.
(Jespersen 1917: 9)

Early Modern English - Colonial English

The syntax of negation in EME: simple negation

- You may not deny it. (Princess, Love's Labour Lost, V.ii)
- Knows he not thy voice? (First Lord, All's Well that End Well, IV.i)
- Dyd not I send unto yow one Mowntayne that was both a traytor and a herytyke, ...? (Mowntayne 210, 1500-1570)

Prediction: intensifying N-words will occur at the next stage.

Theory of Prescriptivism:

SE: the 2nd stage of the Jespersen Cycle was suppressed.

AAVE: N- words emerged as predicted by the Jespersen Cycle

Conclusion: The historical evidence confirms the hypothesis that NC has its precursors in earlier stages of English.

3.2 The Sociolinguistic Argument

The sociolinguistic argument is based on a comparison between Early AAVE (EAAVE) and present day AAVE.

Two Corpora:

- 1. EAAVE: the Early African American Corpus, in particular the Ex-Slave Recordings**
(cf. Howe 1997, 2004, 2005, Poplack 2000).
- 2. AAVE: the present day AAVE Corpus, based on the *Eric-Reports*** (cf. Labov et al. 1968, Weldon 1993).

Variationist Hypothesis: The pattern of NC in AAVE developed from earlier varieties of English.

NC and Intonation in EAAVE and AAVE

Soundfiles from the ex-slave recordings*

Fountain Hughes (born: 1848)



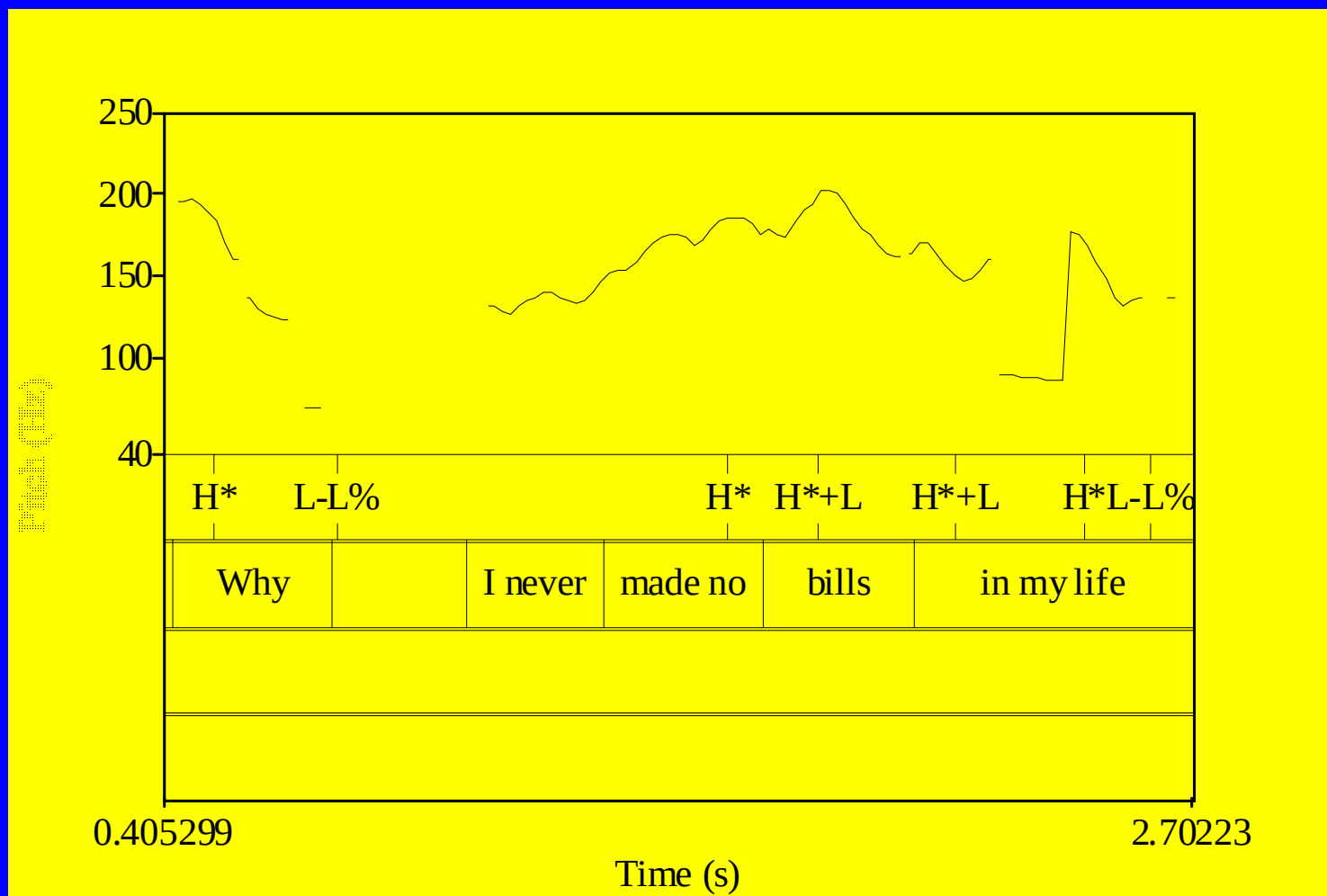
- (26) “My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belong to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was a hundred and fifteen years old when he died. And now I am one hundred and and one year old.”



*Thanks to Jens Maier for the preparation of the soundfiles.

Negation Patterns in the Fountain Hughes Interview

-  (27) "Well after freedom, you know, colored people didn't have nothing. Colored people didn't have no beds when they was slaves. We always slept on the floor."
-  (28) "If I've wanted anything, I'd wait until I got the money and I paid for it cash. I never bought nothing on time in my life."
-  (29) "I never did buy nothing on time. I must tell you on this, I'm sitting right here now today, and if it's the last word I've got to tell you."
-  (30) "Why? I never made no bills in my life."

(31) Pitch extraction contour: Fountain Hughes (05-FH)

**Table 1: Diagnostic criteria of negative constructions
(Howe & Walker 2000)**

	EAAVE	AAVE	Creoles	NSE	SE
ain't	✓	✓	✓	✓	no
NC (type 1 and 2)	✓	✓	✓	✓	no
NC (type 3)	✓	✓	no	✓	no
Inversion	✓	✓	no	✓	no
Negation postposing	✓	✓	no	✓	✓

Obligatory NC As a Creole Diagnostic

The proponents of the Creole Hypothesis claim that AAVE developed from a Creole language and use NC as a diagnostic characteristic.

Argument chain: since Hawaiian Creole is a NC language and AAVE is a NC language, both languages must be related.

- (32) a. Down here *nobody don't* know about *no* club.
(Labov 1972: 786)
- b. nowan no kaen bit diz gaiz
no one not-can beat these guys
Hawaiian Creole (Bickerton 1981: 66)

Obligatory NC As a Creole Diagnostic

Table 2: The percentage of NC in EAAVE, AAVE and in Creole languages

(Labov et al. 1968, Howe & Walker 2000).

	EAAVE	AAVE	Creole
%	81	98	100

The percentage numbers suggest that the obligatory application of NC is a recent development of present day AAVE and does not document a Creole heritage.

The use of *ain't* As a Creole Diagnostic

Table 3: Distribution of *ain't* in contexts of *didn't* in AAVE (Weldon 1993) and EAAVE:

	EAAVE	AAVE
<i>ain't</i>	3%	40%
<i>didn't</i>	97%	60%

The relative prominence of *ain't* in contrast to *didn't* in AAVE constitutes a modern development which occurred in the course of the 20th century.

***Ain't* versus *don't* in AAVE**

The question mark can be explained by the fact that *ain't* is marked in the present day variety of AAVE when used in place of *don't* (cf. Labov 1972).

- (1) a. ?This theory *ain't* make *no* sense.

These results support the claim that the AAVE preference of *ain't* in almost all linguistic contexts is an innovation of AAVE.

4 Summary and Conclusion

- 1. The negation pattern of AAVE is systematic and rule-based. Its relation to Standard English can best be described by the Allomorph Hypothesis.**
- 2. NC and Logical Double Negation can be intonationally disambiguated.**
- 3. Roots of NC in AAVE: Arguments have been given for the Variationist Hypothesis based on the history of English, intonation and sociolinguistics.**

Thank you for your attention!

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