barriers; but, like so many second- and third-generation immigrants from Europe, some blacks have acquired standard English as their native dialect. We are therefore faced with a complex situation where a variety of personal decisions can directly influence the dialects that are learned and used by blacks in America.

Opinions on "bad" English abound, but there is comparatively little in the way of hard linguistic evidence to support early pronouncements on the subject. The taped interviews that I have collected represent the documentation for my observation that street speech is comprised of several flexible styles of speaking. One of the main reasons why my orientation differs from that of other researchers results from the unique practice of repeatedly interviewing the same adults under different social circumstances. Most of the early studies examine isolated black youths on a single occasion; with the newer advantage of long-term study, the true nature of vernacular street styles is exposed with greater clarity (see chapter 3).

Regardless of how we feel about minority dialects and the negative values that are so often associated with them, they are part of the cultural fabric of our society, and it is in this context that children come to adopt the personal values which they will carry into adult life. Like those who have studied this subject before me, I recognize that historical evidence can clarify the nature of contemporary speech, and this historical evidence may, in turn, be beneficial to street speakers. It is largely for this reason that I have chosen to focus on the language of the black street culture, because this is the dialect that thrives among urban blacks who have minimal linguistic contact with those outside their community.

2

The Birth of Black Street Speech

At first glance the birth of black street speech seems to be a fairly straightforward topic, where historical records would be examined to reconstruct the early stages of dialect development. But several factors, including strong prejudices among scholars, have restricted the scope of these studies, to say nothing of their quality. And, once the questions of racial difference and inequality are added, the topic becomes even more complex. The best historical studies of street speech have been completed during this century, as interest in the general topic of black studies has matured.

Understanding the question of racial equality-inferiority is essential to a full appreciation of the early investigations, because much of the historical research was designed to address this question directly. With the proper historical insights, social scientists and educators presumed that they would be in a better position to know why modern street speakers did so poorly in school. In recent times the debate has focused on two opposed positions: street speech was considered to be either *different* or *deficient* when compared to standard English. Depending on how this question is answered, the contemporary consequences for street speakers could be severe. The sociopolitical climate at different points throughout American history has greatly influenced the objectivity of our early social science.

It will therefore be useful to maintain a distinction between the research on the history of street speech and its *actual* history, because different opinions are common. Four noteworthy trends have evolved over the years regarding the development of street speech, and, depending on where one stands, these may be seen as either helpful or detrimental. The earliest writings, going back to the birth of the nation, were, quite simply, racist. Advocates of white supremacy would point to "Negro speech" as definitive evidence of the intellectual inferiority of blacks. The first serious scholarship was produced by American dialectologists, who stressed the English

foundations of street speech. The dialectologist position has been challenged more recently by students of creole languages, who looked primarily at African languages and slave trade jargons as the basis of street speech. The creolist hypothesis is still very popular among many scholars and laypersons, because it provides supportive evidence that reinforces black pride and nationalism; moreover, the creole position emphatically views black speech as being different from standard English—not inferior. The creolists were subsequently among the first legitimate scholars to establish strong links between American blacks and the African continent. However, in the fertile climate of popular support, a balanced historical picture did not emerge until very recently. The most current historical studies suggest a combined hypothesis, where aspects of the creole and dialectology positions interact to create street speech; this seems to be quite logical, since Africa and England have both left linguistic impressions on Afro-American English throughout the Americas.

Because all black Americans ultimately have their roots in Africa, where oral linguistic traditions prevailed, modern historians face a special problem due to sparse—and often questionable—data. Unlike the conservative standardized languages in Europe, where centuries of written traditions influence educated speakers, oral languages tend to change to suit the needs of each living generation of speakers. Those who are familiar with English writing and colloquial speech know that we no longer pronounce the /k/ in *knight* or the /b/ in *climb*, but we accept these archaic spellings to preserve the conventions. The dilemma facing the linguist who is interested in street speech is somewhat more cumbersome, because the "standard" for nonstandard speech is shaped through day-to-day conversations—and not by teachers or grammarians.

I will be concentrating on how these historical analyses reflect on the debate about black intelligence. And, more important, I will focus on why this unique linguistic past has given rise to *flexible* styles, where speakers tend to adapt their speech patterns to suit each situation.

To start at the beginning, then, when slaves first came to America they were considered to be property by nearly everyone. The abolitionists debated this point, but the humane dimension of the topic was quashed by the more pressing need for cheap—and reliable—labor. As beasts of burden the slaves were relegated to positions of inferiority, and racial differences made it easy to perpetuate the gap between black and white societies.

The only voices of moderation that could be heard during this

early period of slavery were white voices. Slaves had no rights; it was even illegal to teach them to read and write. During this time the racist literature flowed like a swollen stream. Few voices cried out to protest the rising tide of racist opinion, as the human tragedy of slavery thrived. Contacts between blacks and whites differed in the North and South. In the North very few whites had extended exposure to blacks, that is, in a broad range of social circumstances. The southern experience, by contrast, was very different. Slave overseers, who were among the lowest social class of whites, as well as wealthy plantation owners, who had house slaves and "mammies" for their children, lived and worked in close proximity to black people. In spite of these regional differences, both areas practiced racial discrimination in one form or another. The racism that lingers today has been born from the stereotypes and prejudices that were imposed—although centuries ago—to keep the races apart.

Unfortunately, one does not have to go too far back in American history to find accounts of these distorted and self-serving opinions. The following quote is just such a painful reminder:

> Collectively, the untutored Negro mind is confiding and single-hearted, naturally kind and hospitable. *Both sexes are easily ruled*, and appreciate what is good under the guidance of common justice and prudence. Yet where so much that honors human nature remains—in apathy the typical wooly-haired races have never invented a reasoned theological system, discovered an alphabet, framed a grammatical language, nor made the least step in science or art. They have never comprehended what they have learned, or retained a civilization taught them by contact with more refined nations as soon as that contact had ceased. They have at no time formed great political states, nor commenced a self-evolving civilization. (Campbell 1851:172)

The entire statement is wrong—emphatically so from a linguistic point of view.

To concentrate, once again, on the true history of street speech, one major distinction logically accounts for the dialect differences that falsely supported the assumptions that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Black slaves coming to this new world were systematically isolated from other speakers of their native language. Slave traders engaged in this practice, thereby deliberately planning the death of African languages, to restrict possible uprisings during the Atlantic crossing. As we shall see in greater detail later, most white immigrants—although poor—were able to keep the language

of their homeland until their children and grandchildren learned English as their native language. Slaves, on the other hand, did not have the advantage—and the communicative luxury—of being able to use their mother tongue. This linguistic isolation is unique to American blacks: with the possible exception of Hawaiian natives, no other American minority has faced this type of linguistic isolation through involuntary capture.

Minstrel shows and the early portrayals of blacks in films and on the radio tended to give popular credence to racist scholarship, passing myths and stereotypes from one generation to the next. At this point in history, however, we have made sufficient strides to dismiss this biased literature as an embarrassment to American scholarship. White American racists were not the first to engage in self-serving ethnocentric writing—the foundations of British anthropology, for example, have long been criticized for similar false notions of supremacy—but America needed slaves to help build the nation, resulting in ethnocentricity in our own backyard.

The racist literature about blacks and black speech in particular should, of course, be dismissed in any serious analysis of the subject, but we must appreciate that the opinions expressed by white supremacists—while often absurd—reflected the feelings of a majority of white Americans. This resulted in a social climate, after the Civil War and beyond the turn of the century, where more liberal thinkers tried to present "Negroes" in a better light. Frederick Douglass did much to retard blatant racism among intellectuals, but American dialectologists were among the very first linguists to treat blacks as equal to other Americans. In fact, the dialectologists contended that it was unfair to analyze the speech of black Americans differently from that of other groups (compare Williamson and Burke 1976).

Upon close reflection, we now know that the dialectologists overstated their case, but it would be wrong to suggest that these oversights were motivated by racism. In fact, the opposite really holds true. In the social climate of America from the 1920s to the 1940s, when the dialectologist position was prevalent, there were pervasive racist attitudes toward anything that was associated with Africa. The portrayal of blacks in films from this period has been analyzed extensively by movie critics, who have observed that false impressions—while historically inaccurate, for example, the Tarzan films—nevertheless influenced the real impressions of the average American viewer.

It was against this rigid backdrop of negative opinion that dialectologists began to raise their voices, claiming that "American Negroes" were not exotic primitives but Americans like any other

immigrants. In turn they argued that efforts to view "Negroes" as a special (that is, inferior) group would only accentuate public opinion that the races were in fact unequal. The noteworthy exceptions to emerge during this period can be found in the writings of Melville Herskovits and in the work of his student Lorenzo Turner, who wrote *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.[1] These writers were viewed quite skeptically when their work first appeared; but with the eventual rise of black nationalism, from the 1960s through the present time, the stature and popularity of their work have grown.

In the 1980s it is all too easy to criticize the efforts of the dialectologists, who are still quite active, because they failed to stress the African side of the issue. But this is an unfair criticism when the historical and sociological climate is taken into account. From the 1920s through the 1940s dialectologists represented the voices of moderation, and they—nearly alone—maintained the position that black Americans were linguistically equal to their white counterparts. I am compelled to stress this point, because the polemic that saturates most recent writings on this subject tends to be extremely harsh on the dialectologist practice of looking primarily at English influences.

To recap the main thrust of their position, then, dialect differences between whites and blacks were examined in much the same manner as other regional dialects. This practice assured that no group would be treated differently from any other. Nevertheless, this procedure alone proved to be inadequate as far as the history of black street speech is concerned.

By contrast, the creolist hypothesis emerged with primary emphasis on African languages, and this position is still strongly advocated by several scholars who study black American dialects. In order to fully appreciate the nature of this research, however, we need first to look at some of the factions within the linguistic profession itself.

The most advanced linguistic research focuses on analyses of educated dialects of the "classic" Romance and Germanic languages, extending to other language families with strong written traditions. The historical reconstruction of each of these languages, say, of those that grew out of Latin, is a precise enterprise, where evidence from centuries of written documentation is carefully pieced together. These reconstructions provide historical depth to the contemporary studies, where the most common practice leads modern

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1. Turner was strongly influenced by Herskovits and Kurath, who developed American dialect atlases.

linguists—as native speakers of their own (educated) dialects—to create their own data based on personal intuitions. Because other scholars typically speak, or are extremely familiar with, these well-documented languages, the intuitions of one scholar can be checked by the informed intuitions of another.

However, there can be no question that the practice of using oneself as a source of "scientific" evidence will have severe restrictions, once analysts encounter a language and/or dialects for which there is little or no existing documentation. In short, this is the very situation that faced analysts of black speech in the United States, and it is still a major factor affecting the quality of historical research on black street speech. Whereas most European immigrants came to America from a homeland with a strong written tradition, African slaves were taken from a land where elders memorized oral histories (see Alex Haley's *Roots*).

For my purpose here, analyzing (educated) dialects—with their long-standing prescriptive traditions and their inevitable retention of archaic forms—differs considerably from reconstructing the indigenous oral languages of Africa. With this distinction in mind, we are in a much better position to view the role of creole studies within linguistics as a general field of study. First, to clarify the relevance of this distinction, some basic terminology needs to be defined.

When slave traders first went to Africa, they obviously did not know how to speak the native African languages. In much the same way that Pilgrims tried to communicate with native Americans, new contact languages were born. Such contact languages—called pidgins—are not native to their speakers. The pidgin results from the need to communicate with people who do not speak your same language. And a pidgin represents the emergence of a new language, which is specifically born out of the contact of two—or perhaps more—other languages. In social terms pidgins tend to be stigmatized, trapped under a shroud of social domination. They usually hold a deferential position compared to the language of those who control political power, which is typically a source of influential linguistic contact.

Once speakers of the pidgin have children, and these children learn the pidgin as their native language, a transformation takes place: the pidgin becomes a creole. In other words, a creole is a nativized pidgin that can usually be distinguished from the original parent languages on several linguistic grounds, including grammatical, lexical, and phonological distinctions, among others (compare Hall 1966). This is why creoles are so easy to detect in the Caribbean

islands or in any other place where new languages are born from the collision of two or more other languages.

For obvious historical reasons, the documentation regarding the birth and growth of creole languages does not compare, even modestly, with the excellent documents that have been used in the reconstruction of Indo-European languages. And it is largely for this reason that creolist scholars were not taken too seriously by linguists who were working with more "classic" languages. This was especially true when linguistics was trying to become an autonomous social science in the early 1920s. Such a situation was, of course, very troublesome to creolists, who felt—with ample justification—that their work was being neglected.

There can be no question that the isolation of creolist scholars among other linguists influenced the nature of their research. In much the same manner that the social sciences have tried to imitate the rigors of physical science methodology, however falsely, creolist scholars attempted to imitate the successful efforts of their colleagues in "classic" historical linguistics. Creolist scholars likewise came to spend tremendous amounts of time locating obscure documents from the slave trade; in the case of street speech, many of these documents were records of people who were directly involved with the capture, transportation, and sale of slaves.

Some disturbing problems arise from this situation, because far too many creolists tried to make strong historical statements based on highly questionable evidence. In fact, it is not uncommon to find historical discussions of street speech that selectively cite documents that concur with preconceived hypotheses, while contradictory evidence of equal (poor) quality is dismissed (see Dillard 1972). This problem is beginning to subside because creole studies have advanced greatly over the past two decades, and the work of several scholars has substantially improved the overall quality of research on contact languages. But the traces of the early biased research tradition have left strong impressions on contemporary analyses of street speech, and, as I have indicated previously, the creolists hypothesis received its strongest support in the popular (black) milieu, because of the African foundations of the position. In fact, Dillard wrote the following statement about "Black English" and its history:

Undoubtedly, the proponents of the East Anglian origins theory and of purely geographic variation (except for the complications of "archaism") have not realized that in their account of the Negro as an archaizing speaker the picture which emerges

is that of a racial archaism—a Negro who just can't catch up or keep up. This is surely the most blatantly racist position which could be presented, if all of its implications are intentional. Since similar linguistic forms occur in the West Indies, on some parts of the West Coast of Africa, and even in Afrikaans, only the kind of historical explanation which scholars like Whinnom, Thompson, Stewart, and Valkoff give could possibly provide a basis for linguistic dignity for the Negro. The idea is so new—and terms like pidgin are subject to such general misunderstanding—that even Black leaders are sometimes resentful of what may seem like a less favorable presentation of Negro language history but one which, upon close examination, turns out to be the only one consistent with Black self-respect. (1972:10–11)

It is my personal contention, as a scholar and a black man, that black self-respect will be enhanced by the truth—even though it is riddled with painful reminders of the social consequences of racism, poverty, and exploitation. Biased scholarship, no matter how it masquerades as a psychological panacea, will only continue to provide a partial image. The history of street speech is not a unilateral issue, either from Anglican or from African sources. I do not mean to imply by this that neither position is correct; rather, the best historical evidence shows that a combined hypothesis is the most accurate, at least at this time.

In order to illustrate this point, we can look at a single example of a street speech dialect feature and review the corresponding assumptions that intersect with the various historical positions. The example that I would like to consider is the use of *is* in street speech or, more specifically, the three variables involved in sentences like "He is coming" > "He's coming" > "He coming," which are all used in street speech.

As American dialects continue to merge through the gradual erosion of once rigid class, regional, and racial barriers, the dialect differences that remain provide—in a very real sense—a half-life cycle as important to linguists as carbon dating is to archaeologists. The rate of subcultural osmosis (that is, the mainstreaming of American subcultures) can be measured by the distribution of dialect differences. For reasons that are still obvious, black Americans have not overcome these barriers with the speed and ease of white immigrants. The racial barriers are less important to my observations than is a full appreciation of the corresponding influence on the development of black and white dialects.

Is, almost more than any other linguistic characteristic, has

been examined in great detail to determine the absence of the verb *to be* in black street speech. It would be wrong to imply that street speech does not use *is*; rather, it is used very differently in standard English. Labov (1969) observed that street speech could omit *is* in the same linguistic environments where standard English uses contractions. The typical speaker of the black street vernacular uses all three possibilities and therefore produces a complex pattern of alternation that is influenced by linguistic and social forces alike. There has been a tendency for dialectologists and creolists to disagree on the use of *is*. As might be expected, both positions are plausible, but both start from completely different points of departure; the main difference lies in the direction of historical change assumed for black street speech. Do speakers have *is* as an underlying aspect of their dialect, or does the vernacular have a vacuous (that is, Ø) form that gradually gives way to the intrusion of *is* as speakers gain more exposure to standard English? I am, of course, simplifying the issue tremendously for the sake of illustration. The historical oppositions are as follows:

Dialectologists   is > 's > Ø
Creolists   Ø > 's > is

As we shall see momentarily, both positions hold some validity, and it is the combination of hypotheses that reveals the most feasible explanation to date. This debate among linguists, which is far too technical for the discussion at hand, is secondary to the fact that nonstandard black speech can be distinguished from all white dialects of American English based on *is* usage alone (compare Wolfram 1974). It is largely for this reason that such a small word has received so much scholarly attention. Yet, in spite of the good intentions of every linguist who has ever worked on this topic, significant distortions of the facts abound in popular books on the subject. For example, at first glance the following comic strip, which has been used in linguistic texts to illustrate black English, suggests that Mary Frances is omitting *is* from her speech:

LUTHER   **BY BRUMSIC BRANDON, JR.**

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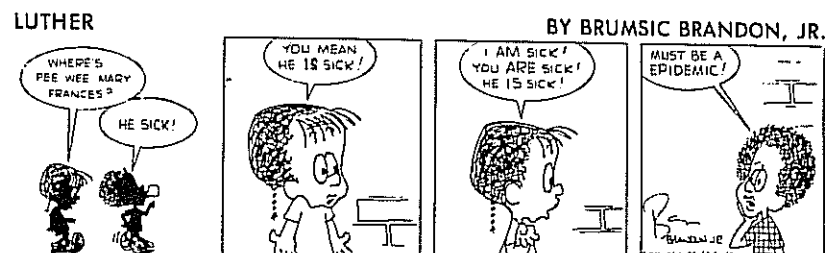
A similar example quoted to illustrate black English appears in Dillard's major work on the subject:

> The standard example is
> (1) My brother sick . . .
> The child who said
> (7) My brother's sick
> probably was indulging in some kind of code-switching under the influence of Standard English. *Proof* [emphasis my own] of this is that he also says
> (11) They's sick
> (12) I's sick . . .

Dillard then goes on to illustrate another example of code switching which, as we will see, is pronounced quite similar to number 1 above and therefore is undetectable in speech:

> (18) My brother be's sick [for a long time]
> where (18) carried over the basically meaningless (in Black English) 's of *They's sick*, *He's sick*, etc. (1972: 52, 54)

My observation is a simple one: these examples are different in print only.

Recalling that these examples have been drawn from books written by linguists, most readers would accept them at face value. However, upon close examination we can see that the quoted sentences are very misleading. To illustrate this point, I need you to perform a brief experiment. Please read the following sentence aloud: "He sick." It's important to say the sentence aloud. Now, please read "He's sick" aloud, taking care to say it as you normally would in conversation. If you repeat this process a few times, again making sure to say both sentences at your normal rate of speech, you will notice that they sound identical. Thus, from the standpoint of conversation, this is an example of phonological neutralization which is not immediately apparent from the written comparison of "He sick" versus "He's sick." I should be quick to point out that a sentence where the verb did not begin with /s/ would serve to illustrate Dillard's point better (for example, "He coming" or "She pretty").

If linguists can, albeit unintentionally, mislead their readers in this way, imagine the difficulty for those who rely on the linguists' judgment for educational or other social purposes. The preceding example stands out here because it focuses on *is*, but it is by no means special when compared to the vast oversimplification of black speech in most of the historical literature. Returning, then, to the significance of *is* within a historical survey, I have suggested that we
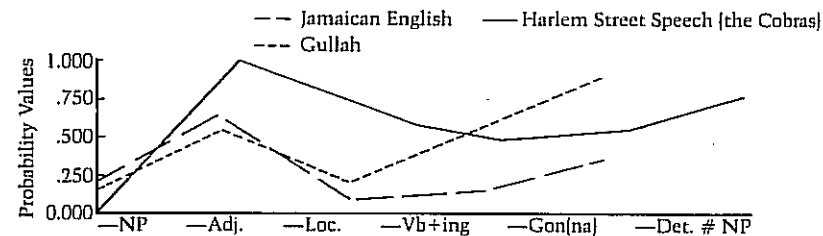
2. Variation for *is* absence in Jamaican English, Gullah, and Harlem street speech

are looking at complementary hypotheses. The reader might properly wonder how this could be; after all, how could *is* and the lack of *is* exist as historical renditions without direct opposition? The answer lies in the gradual historical changes that have occurred.[2] Elsewhere (Baugh 1980), I demonstrate that *is* usage in street speech has ancestral ties both to the Gullah dialect of the Sea Islands and to Jamaican English. Recalling my observation that many of the early creolist scholars searched for monographs from the slave trade in their efforts to reconstruct the protolanguage of slaves, it occurred to me that a new procedure might benefit from a direct comparison of contemporary oral linguistic behavior in disparate black English communities. This is exactly what I did; by comparing the speech of Harlem teens, the Gullah dialect, and Jamaican English, a parallel pattern for the deletion of *is* was revealed. This is illustrated in figure 2.

The categories at the bottom of each graph identify specific linguistic environments that were measured for *is* usage in these three communities—and the similarities are much too great to reflect only historical coincidence. This is especially true when white American dialects are compared to this pattern. The best evidence that is now available subsequently suggests that a complex pattern of historical, social, and linguistic forces has influenced ongoing changes in black street speech. My own research suggests historical linguistic roots that link black street speech with Jamaican creole and Scots-Irish dialects.

For years educators hoped that linguists could solve the historical riddle of black street speech, but, considering the diversity of opinion that exists, practitioners were torn between two highly plausible extremes. I tend to agree with Wolfram's observation

2. I would especially like to thank William Labov and Ralph Fasold for pointing me in the right direction with their pioneering studies.

(1974) that an accurate historical picture is not necessary to formulate a clear analysis of street speech today. While it made good sense twenty years ago to consider this historical debate as part of the educational picture, the final analysis shows that contemporary speech patterns are only part of an intricate pedagogical picture. I would argue that, in spite of the benefits that historical reflection can give us, the evidence is still quite scant. In addition, we have ready access to the street speech that thrives in our own inner cities, and it is from these cities that my study draws its life.

3
Street Speech and Formal Speech: Linguistic Survival in Black and White Societies

The previous historical backdrop provides the necessary depth to allow us to understand the unique social and linguistic problems that face modern black street speakers. As indicated at the outset, black America is not a monoculture. Different interactional strategies are employed by blacks with highly diversified backgrounds. A common denominator nevertheless remains: most blacks are required to function in two societies—one black, the other white. Black street speech is therefore highly functional in the black community, and, from a linguistic point of view, it is equal to any other living language. However, because of the stigma that is still borne by black English—in so many places—black children are taught, if not at home then in school, that the larger mainstream society demands a more "educated" manner of speaking. It is mainly this combination of an oral history with the negative attitudes toward vernacular black dialects that makes this topic so interesting, especially from a linguistic perspective.

When a language has a long-standing written tradition, as in the case of standard English, contemporary generations of speakers come to view the prescriptive grammar as correct, and mere speech is seen as being less than correct. This perception is dominant in societies where the official standard is swaddled with strong emotional and nationalistic overtones. The social or geographical isolation that gave rise to dialect separation tends to be reinforced when speakers interact across dialect lines. Even in situations where generations of nonstandard speakers have gravitated toward the standard, this process is seldom completed to the point where all traces of the native dialect are erased.

Several linguistic strategies have been developed to cope with the pressure of having to survive in two cultures. The behavior that is rewarded in white society is often alien to vernacular black contexts—the opposite of course holds true. Because my study took me to the people, in all types of social contexts, several consultants