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The dialogic nature of nonstandard English

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this text is to describe nonstandard speech events from a dialogic point of view. Dialogism, as defined by Bakhtin himself, refers to the interplay between a speaker's discourse and other uses of language which are exterior to her/him or related to former ones. Analyzing nonstandard utterances actually reveals the speaker's ambiguity which combines two distinct discursive planes – attitudinal and predicative. Starting from the assumption that some of the nonstandard constructions (i.e. negative concord, existential *it*-clauses, preverbal *done*, and double modal constructions) date back to Early Modern English, I will take the view that nonstandard speech events exist in the context of a continuum, and contribute to a better understanding of the system.

Keywords: linguistics, nonstandard English, English grammar, dialogism, variation.

1. Introduction

Many nonstandard constructions date back to the Early Modern English period (from about 1450), an age of transition to present-day English. According to Gachelin (1990: 221), "what is branded as nonstandard corresponds to Early Modern English usage or stands as an original innovation, which can even occasionally be already seen at work inside marginal trends of standard English, like the disaspectualization of the Present Perfect used with past reference." Thus, forms that were accepted in the past as regular usage have been deemed "deviations" or "mistakes" since then. Nonstandard English, however, has the capacity to be recognized and interpreted by a majority of English-speaking people. Standard English is arguably a minority use (Trudgill 1979, McArthur 1998), and many native

speakers do not generally question the grammaticality of nonstandard performance¹. Then, it does not seem inaccurate to describe nonstandard productions in dialogic terms.

Depending on its dialogic nature both within the system and in discourse, nonstandard English may be regarded as a synchronic projection of the history of English. Language begins within the context of a situation. This paper identifies nonstandard English productions as dialogical inasmuch as they are used in a network of personal interactions, on the one hand, and can, on the other hand, be related to former language states. These linguistic features have become either archaic, or nonstandard altogether. It is the case, for instance, of negative concord or of preverbal *done* in nonstandard varieties of English.

The linguistic description of these features can be regarded as an attempt to discuss the dialogic effects of nonstandard speech events within the system of English. In other words, it aims to show that these constructions exist in a continuum which can be related to dialogism and therefore be considered as the manifestation of several underlying voices in a sentence. So before dealing with the dialogic nature of nonstandard English and analyzing sentences in which nonstandard constructions occur, I will discuss dialogism and the historical background of such nonstandard use which can be traced back to Early Modern English. Nonstandard grammar may be illustrated by examples taken from my own research corpus which includes many dialectal varieties of English spoken in the United States and in the British Isles.

2. Dialogism

Dialogism refers to a concept developed by the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin to account for his work on literary theory (Bakhtin 1952/1986; Todorov 1981). It can be defined as the interplay between a speaker's discourse and other uses of language which are exterior to her/him. For Bakhtin, language is dialogical, in the sense that it is always related to former uses (diachronic or dialectic dialogism) while existing in anticipation of a response. It is, as it were, the manifestation of multiple voices which emerge at the surface

¹ Sentences are judged ungrammatical when any ordinary speaker of English would feel that something is wrong with them, that they somehow do not belong to the system and therefore cannot be accepted, e.g. **Peter Mary loves*, **Mary dined a hamburger*, **Peter put a car*, **Peter has going to Paris*, etc.

of an utterance. Dialogism, therefore, appears to be the revelation of voices which can be sensed on many different levels. This concurs with T.S. Eliot's idea that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 1920) and points to the concept that a sentence (or a text) always exists in relation to previous expressions within a given sphere and, arguably, is embedded in socio-historical context (Linell 2009: 19).

The description of language requires that the linguist be familiar with all linguistic history. No expression of any kind has its complete meaning in itself. Its significance can only be appreciated in its relation to former uses of language. As stated in the introduction, language does not exist in a vacuum and, therefore, must be set for contrast and comparison in continual language change. Following the example of standard English, nonstandard English productions relate to language states which were in use as far back as Early Modern English and are branded as nonstandard by prescription which clings to the notion of norm, thus discarding a large amount of productions which may inform us of the reality of language usage. Historical association, however, does not suffice to supply a full picture of the relevant diachronic facts if the analysis is synchronic. The linguistic analysis seeks to provide evidence that shows the dialogic characteristics of nonstandard productions in which exchanges and recurrent discursive interplay occur.

The dialogic nature of a sentence can be seen in every domain of communication, in the sense that it reflects the complexity of another discourse, that of language. Grammatically, dialogism rests on the speaker's ambiguity which combines two levels of discourse, like, for example, negation, interrogation, comparison, concession, modalisation, etc. (cf. Brès – Mellet 2009). In nonstandard English, double constructions, which arise from Early Modern English usage (cf. Larroque 2015) and are now regarded as deviations relative to standard English, are a living illustration of that.

As a matter of fact, many aspects of Modern English can still be found in contemporary nonstandard English, although they have been condemned by prescriptive rules in an attempt to keep the language as proper, logical, and homogeneous as possible. For example, Early Modern English is rife with redundant constructions, such as negative concord, a common grammatical feature of Old English; double modal constructions which are evidence of a category change between the 16th and the 19th century; the "double perfect" (i.e. *had've* + past participle); double comparatives and superlatives which in Elizabethan English existed alongside morphological and periphrastic non-redundant structures; in the verbal system, preverbal

done, which is frequently used in African American English, also had its Middle English version before its importation into nonstandard speech. All these grammatical constructions stand as survivors to prescription and the continual syntactic and morphological evolution of the language. They remain in use in many nonstandard English varieties and bear witness to a former state of the English language.

3. Data and methodology

The data described in this paper are excerpts specifically selected for the purpose, and which exhibit some of the aforementioned grammatical phenomena. It may appear to be heterogeneous inasmuch as the samples collected come from different sources. The main criterion of choice is that the language reflects inadequate grammatical competence as regards standard English, but that the performance can be recognized and interpreted by a large majority of native speakers.

The excerpt taken from Baugh (1999) presents some African American English peculiarities that can be found in other nonstandard English varieties, and which can be analyzed from a dialogic point of view. It illustrates how the speaker's socio-historical identity (i.e. the linguistic consequence of slavery) is linked to her language. It provides an authentic representation of nonstandard speech. Other excerpts, taken separately, show traces of multiple voices. They may have a dialogic relation, not only with other similar states of language, but also within their own deep structures. Double constructions, for instance, can be analyzed according to the specific discourse role of each constituent of the pattern. The now famous example of double negatives, which, prescriptivists say, defy logic, shows that two negatives in the same sentence do not cancel each other out and yield a positive, because the basic and simple principle that there is a direct relationship between the surface syntactic structure and the logical form is false. A dialogic approach of the phenomenon may expand our understanding of negative concord in nonstandard English varieties, and thereby expand upon other double formulations or apparent redundancies.

The following analyses will be limited to four specific nonstandard phenomena, namely negative concord, existential *it*-clauses, preverbal *done*, and double modal constructions. These, I argue, constitute a fair representation of what can be described as dialogical. As mentioned, it is important to examine adequately the relevant historical insights which may shed light on the synchronic variation that will be described

thereafter. Another possible limitation stems from the corpus itself and its heterogeneity which, if extended, may not allow to fully evaluate the scope of the analyses. At this stage of the present study, I will only concentrate on the aforementioned cases that spread across dialectal boundaries.

4. Analyzing sentences

Some of the most interesting examples which can be analyzed from a dialogic point of view are given in Baugh's (1999: 5) interview of an African American woman which runs as follows:

You can never forget that slavery was a bitch from the get-go. **Slaves didn't get no schoolin' and they ain't never really given us (African Americans) equal opportunities (1)**, so how we supposed to talk like white folks, and why would we want to? **It ain't no white people really care about us (2)**, 'cause if they did they wouldn't try to make you turn into a white person,, they'd take like you is. But they don't do that. All my teachers in school kept tellin' me, "if you don't speak proper, you won't get a job." That's bullshit! I know some Brothers that went to college – y'know, they did the "white things", with good grades and good English, and they still have problems on the job. **They done tol' me about this Brother who did all the work for a white boy at his job (3)**, and then they (the Whites) lied on his ass when the boss found out and he was fired, and nobody tried to help him. How can you trust motherfuckers that do shit like that, and they say we stupid 'cause we don't talk proper – I see what's goin' on, and I see what's comin' down, and **it ain't got nothin' to do with how we talk (4)**. It's all about money, power, and politics – plain and simple!

4.1. Negative concord

The example of negative concord is all the more interesting since it brings together several voices. It can be accounted for by describing very precisely how attitudinal and predicative operations, marked respectively with *don't* and *ain't*, and *no schoolin'* and *never really given us equal opportunities* in example (1), combine linguistically between the speaker and the lexis, and how double negatives relate to the different former dialogic configurations in which they occur. For example, *don't* and *ain't* establish, by means of

the auxiliaries *do-* and *ai-* (= *have*), a direct relationship between the sentence and the speaker who negates a positive (*do-n't* and *ai-n't*). In *don't* and *ain't*, *do-* and *ai-* are locative markers which relate the sentence to the speaker (Larroque 1999: 125-126) and constitute a dialogic response to a preconstruct to be inferred from the context (cf. *You can never forget that slavery was a bitch...*). The sentence can indeed be reworded as:

- (1) No, slaves got no schoolin', and no, they have never really given us equal opportunities.

In this paraphrase, *no* (the adverb) indicates direct anchoring to the speaker. *Don't* and *ain't*, in (1), can therefore be construed as locatives referring to the speaker and the speech situation. As the adverb *no*, they function as boundary morphemes and as such they are invariable (cf. example 4: *it ain't got nothin'...*); *no schoolin'* and *never really given us equal opportunities* apply to the predicative (informational) level, i.e. the lexis. This may explain why a double negation construction does not yield a positive. A similar analysis can be conducted for sentence (4). Besides, the duplication of marks in a sentence has an intensifying meaning.

Negation in Old English was *ne* and was reinforced by the particle *wilt* (> *naght* > *not*). This type of negative reinforcer is a popular strategy in language and tends to become simply a negative particle, thus losing its original nominal meaning. Double negation was commonly used until the 15th century and was ruled out of standard English in the 16th century. It has survived in many nonstandard English varieties as a manifestation of the past and reminds us that language exists in constant and relational evolution. In that sense it is dialogical. There is, moreover, an incessant interplay between so-called nonstandard productions, that is the idiosyncratic way in which the verbal system has been internalized, and the grammar of the common language. This may entail a dialogic relationship between standard and nonstandard language varieties.

4.2. Existential clauses

In nonstandard English, especially African American English, existential clauses are often introduced by *it* instead of *there*, as in sentence (2), reproduced below:

- (2) It ain't no white people really care about us. (in Baugh's interview)

The construction was present in standard English until the 17th century, for example in Shakespeare's "For 'tis no trusting to yond foolish lout" (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV, iv, 66). Although it is regarded as nonstandard, it has lived on until today. In the latter, 'tis can be analyzed as *there is*.

Existential *there* in English is a function word which has developed from the place adverb *there*, which is bleached of its nominal meaning in existential clauses. But, although it functions as syntactic (grammatical) subject of the clause, it retains enough of its original place meaning to provide an abstract situational reference to introduce new information (Joly – O'Kelly 1989: 145), and thereby exemplify its inherently dialogic quality: existential *there* may occur in the same clause as place adverbs *here* and *there*:

- (3) (a) There ain't nothing here, lieutenant. (taken from K. Costner's film *Dances with Wolves*, 1990)
- (b) There ain't nothing there no more. Just a lot of bones. (P. Auster, *Moon Palace*, 1989)
- (c) There's wee-er laddies than me that goes round and starts tossing stones at the laddies round there. (Lowland Scots, Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 118)

In light of existential *there* which has lost much of its original place meaning to become a function word, one might be tempted to analyze existential *it* in the same way. Most linguists would describe the pronoun as a "mere prop word" (Sweet 1891/1969: 75) devoid of meaning, just a syntactic subject, the actual notional subject being presented in the indefinite noun phrase following the copular verb. Bolinger (1977: 84), however, defines the nature of *it* as "a definite nominal with almost the greatest generality of meaning limited only in the sense that it is neuter." For example, in sentence (4), *it* can be paraphrased as *the whole situation I am referring to* (cf. the context: 'I see what's going on, and I see what's going down'):

- (4) It ain't got nothin' to do with how we talk. (in Baugh's interview)

Therefore, *it* refers to a notional content, and subsumes all the elements occurring in the paraphrase.

In sentence (2), existential *it* hinges on a problem of focalization, either on the existence, or on the identity of the new information. In (2), *it* can be reworded as *the object I am mentioning the existence of*. It can, therefore, be construed as the anaphoric substitute for the situation referred to

by the speaker *No white people really care for us* corresponds to *it*². Thus, *it* in existential clauses appears to be dialogical, in that it establishes a link between the linguistic and the extralinguistic situation: *it* emphasizes the notional subject and at the same time identifies it as relative to the situation. As *it* is more specific in socially marked nonstandard varieties, it appears to be more adequate to translate situational immediacy.

When stating the existence of something, which can be construed as the selection of an item from the speech situation, the denoted object may be determined in relation to the speaker, or retrieved and identified, singled out amid other subjects. The dialogic nature of existential *it* rests on an assumption of similarity: it shares the same underlying representations as existential *there* while carrying representations of former popular speech, which informs us of the history of existential clauses³. In the late Middle English period, dematerialized *there* came to be used and was to become dominant in Modern English, and still is in present-day English.

4.3. Preverbal *done*

In order to describe the grammaticalization of preverbal *done*, in sentence (3), and its diachronic evolution, it is necessary to analyze the attitudinal (mental) operations underlying its meaning (which is still carried with the past participle form of the verb *do*), that is the perfective aspect such as it is marked by the periphrastic *have* + *V-en* construction, and the direct relationship it establishes between the speaker and the sentence. On the other hand, the recurring discursive interplay which, within the framework of dialogism, not only interlocutory, but also with reference to a former state of language, helped the morpheme to shift from an initially lexical value to a locative grammatical one (cf. *have* in standard English) and turn the past participle into an auxiliary in nonstandard utterances.

Mustanoja (1960: 605-606) argues that Middle English had a *done* which may have carried the same perfective meaning as the sentences in which *Have* + *V-en* occurs to mark the perfective aspect, but it was usually preceded by the auxiliary *have*, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (end of the 14th century):

² Linguistically, this may be called 'anticipatory anaphora' (Huddleston – Pullum 2002: 1312).

³ Black slaves may have picked up the expression from the English slavers who, in the 17th century, transported them from West Africa to the Americas.

- (5) (a) An Oratorie, riche for to see,
 In worship of Dyane of Chastitie,
 Hath Theseus doon wrought in noble wyse.
('Knyghtes Tales', st. 7)
- (b) This merchant han doon fraught his shippers nerve,
 And whan they han this blissful mayden say,
 Hoon to Surrye been they went ful fayn,
 And doon his nedes as they han doon you
 And liven in wede, I kan sey yow namoore.
('The Tale of the Man of Law', ll. 171-175)

These sentences show that the preverbal *done* construction is not a grammatical innovation. Ellegård (1953) and Visser (1966, 2002) point out that the usage was common in the 15th and 16th centuries, as in (c):

- (c) When the Clerkes have dooen syngyng. (Book of Prayers; 1549)

The difference is that the frequently-used auxiliary *have*, in unstressed position, has been deleted as a surface marker, not the underlying operation. *Done*, then, becomes the locator and perfective marker.

If, historically, the rise of the perfective aspect to mark the relation to a reference point can be attributed to the aoristic derivation of markers, the simple past being too objective, it follows that the preverbal *done* structure can be regarded as a synchronic response to that development by creating a new, more expressive construction to locate the event by relating it to the speech situation and the speaker. The development can be analyzed as follows:

- the past participle (*tol'* in Baugh's interview, sentence 3) represents the temporal root (the past);
- *done* can be rephrased as *have done*, which is the intermediary stage of the evolution;
- *done* stands alone, *have* is deleted (*done* presupposes *have*) and the locative element is the time of speaking, that is the interview itself.

Thus, preverbal *done* is the result of an interplay of semantic, syntactic and grammatical (and probably phonological) change, on the one hand, and a dialogic response to a need for expressiveness, on the other. Furthermore, one may sense an added metalinguistic value, because *done tol'* (Baugh's interview, 3) is certainly more emphatic and markedly resembles a polemic.

At the beginning, *done* was both the simple past and the past participle form of the verb *do*. Through continual use in perfective constructions in Middle and Early Modern English, the locating function has shifted from the auxiliary to the verb, as in sentence 3 in Baugh's interview in which *done* has acquired a perfective meaning. In present-day English, it appears in nonstandard utterances, especially in the southern states of the United States of America. Historical data place the latest occurrences of the marker in standard English around the 16th century and in the north of England and Scotland. In some nonstandard varieties, *done* is regarded as an archaic reintroduction (US southern states).

4.4. Double modal constructions

I cannot end this examination without considering the case of double modal constructions which in nonstandard English exhibit a dialogic attitudinal ambiguity in the use of modal verbs. Examples which currently appear in some varieties of English are given below.

- (6) You may can find more information throughout the website. Here are some areas that may help. (Omega 3, "Learning for Health and Medicine", 2008)
- (7) If you're already in College, you might could well because you're looking at making sure that they, they fulfill what is a dream for you and for them. (Abbey life introduction course, recorded on January 25, 1994, spoken part of the BNC)
- (8) because, as you probably know Clyde was looking into a program which will could alleviate a lot. Yes, I know. (Conversation recorded on April 1992, spoken part of the BNC)
- (9) If a woman chooses to stay home [...] we feel that she should ought to have the opportunity. (Baptists debate, New Seminary Degree in Homemaking, Audrey Barrick, *The Christian Post*, 15 August, 2007)

Double modal constructions can be described as the result of epistemic modality in conjunction with root modality (Brown 1991: 76-77; Denison 1998; Larroque 2005: 212-213; Brandstetter 2006; Larroque 2010, 2015: 69-79). In such combinations, the two modals behave syntactically and semantically in a restricted order. In sentences (6-9), for example, the epistemic meaning (*it is possible/probable/predictable/necessary/required that...*) is carried with the first modal. In (6), *may* as first modal indicates a contingent state of affairs while *might* in sentence (7) is used in its conditional sense. *Will* can

be epistemic in the sense of prediction as in (8)⁴, and *should* in example (9) is used epistemically, since the proposition refers to the sphere of non-self⁵. The second modal carries a root meaning and applies to the subject-predicate nexus. In sentences (6-8), *can/could* refers to ability while in (9), *ought* can be interpreted as a deontic marker.

Interestingly, it is to be noted that the epistemic modal comes first in the sequence as it denotes the speaker's assessment of the propositional content. Thus, the modal applies to the whole proposition and thereby indicates direct anchoring to the speaker. That is another reason why the first modal is logically and iconically restricted to an epistemic sense and has an attitudinal function. It represents a dialogic response to the presupposed subject-predicate structure involving the root (second) modal which is close to the function and the meaning of a lexical verb.

In Old English, modal verbs shared the same syntactic and morphological properties as other verbs. In other words, Old English had a single category of verbs which included the modals (Lightfoot 1979; Denison 1993; McMahon 1994). They had an infinitive form, inflections, and a "normal" complementation including a direct object (Lightfoot 1979: 100; Denison 1993: 327; Bauer 1994: 23-24)⁶ as in Shakespeare's lines in (10):

- (10) Let the priest in surplice white
That defunctive music can. (*The Phoenix and the Turtle*, 14, 1601)

In Modern English, modals behaved in a way that set them apart from other verbs. English then innovated a new category of verbs which gradually lost some of their nominal meaning and developed syntactic properties as auxiliaries, especially when some of these verbs ceased to be used with a direct object (Crépin 1994: 145). It is, indeed, a case of grammaticalization accompanied with a category change which began in the 15th century, in Early Modern English.

I have mentioned that when it comes to modality, the general tendency is to distinguish two interpretations, epistemic and root modality. Epistemic modality applies to the entire subject-predicate structure. It concerns the relationship between the propositional content of the sentence and the speaker's assessment of the actualization of the subject-predicate nexus

⁴ *Will* should not be restricted to a simple marker of futurity.

⁵ *Should* as a single modal can be either an epistemic modal (*The weather should clear up tomorrow*), or a root modal (*You should behave yourself*), depending on whether the relationship is interpersonal or not.

⁶ A "normal" complementation includes transitivity and intransitivity, subordination, prepositional phrases.

using what evidence he or she has of the situational context. Epistemic meanings arguably developed from root, namely deontic, modality when it was frequently used with forms marking the speaker's subjectivity (Traugott 1989). As for root modality, it applies to the subject-predicate relation and, as it were, qualifies the subject of the sentence.

Thus, due to the specific discourse role of each constituent of the construction, it is not surprising that they may foster a dialogic relation by combining speaker involvement and informational content, that is the attitudinal and the predicative levels of the sentence. When a single modal is used, it carries both the information and the speaker's judgment about the subject-predicate relation. For example, (6) above can be rephrased as:

- a) You can find some information throughout the website.
- b) You may find some information throughout the website.
- c) You may be able to find some information throughout the website.

Can in (a) expresses a possibility inherent in the subject (*you*): access to the information is made possible by consulting the website (= *it is possible for you to find some information throughout the website*); in (b-c), *may* encodes the speaker's assessment of the propositional content. Epistemic modality is only represented in (b-c). In (c), the suppletive *be able to*, which is not exactly a modal (it is sometimes called a semi-modal), makes the root reading of *can* more explicit.

The historical insights provide evidence of this state of affairs, and at the same time shed light on the synchronic variation that has just been described. Again, double modal constructions should not be cut off from the former dialogic configurations in which they appeared. Indeed, modal verbs have also undergone semantic changes which may be the result of metaphor or, as Traugott (1989: 50) puts it, of "conversational implicature". This involves two discursive levels and may in turn be analyzed within the framework of dialogism⁷.

5. Conclusion

I have attempted to show that nonstandard English is dialogical in the sense that it appears within the natural movement or evolution of the language.

⁷ *Shall* (OE *sculan*), for example, is historically akin to the OE notion of financial debt (*icsceal* = *I owe*), hence the idea of constraint, moral debt, or of having to do something unwillingly.

Many forms that are considered deviations or mistakes in present-day English are occasions to explore grammatical phenomena that can be related to structures which were in common use in Early Modern English. Despite prescriptive rules which impose a norm (which is arbitrary) and strive “to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that language” (Lowth 1762: xi), nonstandard usage is not inherently worse than any other variety. As such, it is worthy of analysis.

The notion of dialogism is important in grammatical studies, such as those about nonstandard grammar, because it highlights the multi-relational aspect of the language: 1) nonstandard usage appears to be directly associated with a former state of language, while prescription may disrupt the continuum, and 2) there are variable degrees of dialogic instances, where uses bring out the complexity of speech production, that is, the ambiguity which combine two discourse units: the predicative and the attitudinal levels. Double grammatical structures such as negative concord or double modal constructions provide evidence of that, with reference to Early Modern English. Furthermore, recurrent discursive interplay processes may result in the grammaticalization of lexical items (cf. *there, done*).

The present study has aimed to contribute to a better understanding of nonstandard English varieties, and thereby explicates the dialogic nature of grammatical representations, both standard and nonstandard. There is no objective boundary or straight line between the two, if not a dialogic relationship which may have social and educational consequences.

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