The linguistic consequences of being a lame

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ABSTRACT

The most uniform and characteristic variety of Black English is the grammar used by members of the vernacular culture in pre-adolescent and adolescent years: the 'Black English Vernacular'. Less regular varieties which show the influence of other dialects, are used by isolated individuals within the community ('lames') who are less familiar with vernacular norms. Rules that are categorical for the vernacular are often variable for lames. Within the vernacular peer groups, core members show the most regular or frequent use of characteristic rules such as the deletion of *is*. Since most linguists grow up relatively isolated individuals within their own communities, it is important that they become aware of the linguistic consequences of being lame, and apply this knowledge in their methodology.

> Who's the lame who says he knows the game
> And where did he learn to play?
> – *The Fall*[1]

This is a study of the grammars of isolated individuals – known as 'lames' in the Black English vernacular. They are the typical informants made available to investigators who study non-standard language in schools, recreation centers, and homes with the help of adults who control these institutions. The form of Black English used by lames will be compared with that used by members of the dominant social groups of the vernacular culture. The findings will be of considerable sociological interest, since it appears that the consistency of certain grammatical rules is a fine-grained index of membership in the street culture. The data should also be of interest to theoretical linguistics, since it appears that patterns of social interaction may influence grammar in subtle and unsuspected ways. Finally, we will consider the serious methodological problem which these

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[1] The opening lines of the version given by Saladin to John Lewis, in the course of the investigation reported in W. Labov, P. Cohen, C. Robins and J. Lewis, 'A Study of the Non-standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City', Final Report on Cooperative Research Project 3288, supported by the Office of Education [reprinted by U.S. Regional Survey, 3812 Walnut Street, Philadelphia 19104]. This paper is based on section 4.3.2 of that report, 'Linguistic indices of peer group membership'. The participant-observation work of Robins and Lewis is primarily responsible for the data presented here; and I am deeply indebted to them for many findings and observations reported here.

findings pose for linguists in general. It is in fact the same methodological problem with which this study begins: locating the most consistent and reliable data for describing the grammar of the speech community.

LOCATING THE VERNACULAR

The largest part of our recent research of the speech community has focused upon the language used by primary peer groups in natural, face-to-face interaction. The grammatical descriptions of Black English in Cooperative Research Report 3288 are largely based upon group sessions with pre-adolescent and adolescent peer groups – the Thunderbirds, Aces, Jet and Cobras (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968). Recent work on Hawaiian Creole was also based on participant observation with natural peer groups in Hauula and Nanakuli (Labov 1971). We have followed the same policy in exploratory work on sound change in various regions of the United States, England, Ireland and France (Labov to appear). As we enter any city we look for pre-adolescent and adolescent peer groups engaged in sports or hanging-out; we encounter family groups at tea or after dinner; we join groups of old men at bowls, in pubs, or sitting at pensioners' benches.

In this approach we are departing more and more from the earlier tradition of sociolinguistic studies which depended upon face-to-face interviews with single individuals drawn from judgment samples (Kurath 1949; Labov 1963); or from random samples (Labov 1966; Shuy, Wolfram and Riley 1966; Levine and Crockett 1966; Ashen 1969; Trudgill 1971); and we are following the more ethnographic approach first outlined by Gumperz in his work in Norway (1964). Random sampling is of course an essential procedure if we want to describe the over-all sociolinguistic structure of the community, and our recent work in South Central Harlem relied heavily on a stratified random sample of one hundred adults. But severe problems of explanation and interpretation are created when we extract single speakers from their social network and limit ourselves to records of their speech in one-to-one interaction with the interviewer. It seems most likely that a random sample will be used in future sociolinguistic studies to select individuals for study in the context of the social groups in which they normally operate.

We focus upon natural groups as the best possible solution to the *observer's paradox*: the problem of observing how people speak when they are not being observed (Labov 1970). The natural interaction of peers can overshadow the effects of observation, and help us approach the goal of capturing the vernacular of every-day life in which the minimum amount of attention is paid to speech: this is the most systematic level of linguistic behavior and of greatest interest to the linguist who wants to explain the structure and evolution of language.

But there is a second even more compelling reason for us to select natural

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groups of speakers rather than isolated individuals. The vernacular is the property of the group, not the individual. Its consistency and well-formed, systematic character is the result of a vast number of interactions; the group exerts its control over the vernacular in a supervision so close that a single slip may be condemned and remembered for years.[2] The overt norms of the dominant social class can operate to produce a consistent superordinate dialect, if that class is reasonably cohesive and protected from large-scale invasions from below. Thus the Received Pronunciation described by H. C. Wyld was a class dialect rigorously controlled in the British public (private) schools (1936: 3). At the other end of the social spectrum, the covert norms of the street culture operate to produce the consistent vernacular of the urban working class. The lower class culture differs from upper class culture in that its base in the population becomes progressively narrower with age. In the early adolescent years, the focal concerns of lower class culture (Miller 1958) involve all but the upper middle and upper class in America. But individuals are gradually split away from involvement in these concerns, so that only a small percentage of 'lower-lower-class' adults retain this orientation wholeheartedly as they grew older.[3]

We usually find that the most consistent vernacular is spoken by those between the ages of 9 and 18. It is well known that in most cities peer group membership reaches a peak at the ages of 15 to 16 (Wilmott 1966); as the young adult is detached from the teen-age hang-out group he inevitably acquires a greater ability to shift towards the standard language and more occasions to do so. In some sharply differentiated sub-systems, a consistent vernacular can be obtained only from children and adolescents: the grammars of adults seem to be permanently changed by their use of standard rules. This is the case with Hawaiian Creole English ('Hawaiian Pidgin') (Labov 1971) and Black English (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968). In general, working adults will use a sharper degree of style shifting than adolescents in their careful speech with outside observers, and only under the most favorable circumstances will their vernacular system emerge. In old age, much of this superposed variation disappears. But it is still an open question how much the basic vernacular system changes in the course of a lifetime.[4]

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[2] A classic case, reported in Whyte 1955, is that of the Cornerville group known as the Cream Puffs for many years, because someone had heard one member say 'Aw shucks!' when a store was out of something he wanted to buy.

[3] In any survey, we run across a few lower class subjects who openly and defiantly endorse lower class values. A red-haired woman of fifty-five answered all of the questions in the Lower East Side survey (Labov 1966) in this style. She told me how she had answered a previous interviewer when he asked about her job aspirations: 'To be a prostitute!' She claimed that she would curse and swear to anyone, it didn't matter who. But one of her married daughters disagreed: 'Not when you answer the phone, Ma!'

[4] This is a crucial question for the interpretation of standard dialectological materials, and even more important for our current work in tracing sound changes in progress through distribution through age levels ('apparent time'). Earlier reports in real time

MEMBERS AND LAMES

In our work on sound change, we are concerned with the working-class vernacular (rather than an upper-class dialect) because it forms the main stream in the history of the language. The vernacular affects a much larger number of speakers in a more intimate way than the standard, and the transmission of linguistic tradition through successive peer groups takes place in the sub-culture dominated by the vernacular (which we will refer to as the *vernacular culture*). But even in the most solid working-class areas, there are many isolated children who grow up without being members of any vernacular peer group and a steadily increasing number of individuals split away from the vernacular culture in their adolescent years.

The Black English vernacular currently refers to such isolated individuals as 'lames'. They are not *hip*, since they do not hang out. It is only by virtue of being available and on the street every day that anyone can acquire the deep familiarity with local doings and the sure command of local slang that are needed to participate in vernacular culture. To be 'lame' means to be outside of the central group and its culture; it is a negative characterization and does not imply any single set of social characteristics. Some lames can't or won't fight – they are cowards or weaklings; some are 'good' in that they do not steal, smoke, shoot up dope, or make out, but others may be just as tough or just as 'bad' as peer group members; they may merely be distant, going their own way with their own concerns. What all lames have in common is that they lack the knowledge which is necessary to run any kind of a game in the vernacular culture. The term 'lame' can carry a great deal of contempt especially where someone pretends to knowledge he doesn't have. One of the epic statements of the Black English culture, *The Fall*, begins on this note as shown in the quotation under the title of this paper. Again we find that in 'Mexicali Rose', the protagonist puts down his main man, Smitty, because he hit on a girl and failed.

> Smitty dipped easy and from behind
> 'Lame, you think your game is stronger than mine?'
> Sam said, 'Not only is my game stronger, but my spiel is tougher,
> So move over, Jake, and watch me work.'[5]

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are of course essential supports for any argument about change in progress, no matter how fragmentary they may be. But it is also possible to show from internal distribution what changes have been occurring later in life, since these superposed rules do not have the regular character of the earlier vernacular. Responses to formal questions, like minimal pair tests, will often show a newly acquired norm, quite distinct from the pattern of speech. An 80-year-old man from central Pennsylvania, for example, made a clear distinction between *hock* and *hawk*, *Don* and *dawn* in his connected speech, but reported them as the same and merged them in his production of minimal pairs – at a completely different point in phonological space.

[5] From the version of Big Brown, recorded in New York City in 1965.

There are many reasons for someone to be lame. Separation from the peer-group may take place under the influence of parents, or of school, or of the individual's own perception of the advantages of the dominant culture for him; on the other hand, he may be too sick or too weak to participate in the peer-group vernacular activities, or he may be rejected by the peer-groups as mentally or morally defective (a 'punk'). In our work in South Central Harlem, we encountered many examples of all these factors; one of the most important factors is the active intervention of parents. For example, a swimming team at Milbank recreation center is said to have been broken up in 1963 when the mother of Ricky S. objected to his 'hanging around with Stanley an' 'em.'

A high concentration of lames will be found in any selective social institution or activity which requires the active participation of parents. Our work in South Central Harlem included one study of 50 boys in 'Vacation Day Camps' – recreation centers set up during the summer of 1965 in schoolyards throughout New York City.[6] Since parents had to enroll boys in the program, and it was run in schools by adults, this 'VDC' series contrasts as a whole with data provided by the Thunderbirds, Jets and Cobra peer groups, formed apart from and in spite of, the influence of parents and schools.

Social institutions, such as the early grades of the public schools, will of course include both lames and members of the vernacular culture [hereafter referred to as 'members']. Teachers, testers, educational psychologists and linguists who work or hang out only in schools have no way of distinguishing these categories. Only by working outside of these institutions can we obtain an over-all view of who is who and estimate the relative size of the vernacular component. The importance of this knowledge for an analysis of educational problems cannot be overstated. Elsewhere we have shown that lames in Harlem schools read only one or two grades behind the national norms and generally follow an upward curve of reading achievement; but the large body of peer group members show a very much lower pattern with a ceiling at the fourth-grade reading level (see Labov and Robins 1969). The ability to distinguished lames from members is even more important for linguists trying to study the vernacular, for as we shall see, lames and members differ systematically in their grammars as well as in their school performance.

What are the percentages of members and *lames* in any inner city population? One answer to this question appears in our study of the peer groups located in a thirteen-story apartment building in a low income project, 1390 Fifth Avenue. With help from the boys themselves, we carried out an enumeration of all youth living in this building. Table 1 shows the population of boys from 6 to

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[6] The selection of Vacation Day Camps was done on a geographically random basis, but the individual subjects in the camps were not chosen randomly. They were boys who were not engaged in sports or any other social activity at the time, and the bias of the VDC selection was therefore increased in the direction of isolates or lames.

19 years old. The seventeen Thunderbirds range from 9 to 13 years, and make up 45 per cent of the thirty-eight boys in this range. The seven Oscar Brothers, a related older group, make up 33 per cent of the boys in the 16 –18 year range.[7] Table 1 also indicates some of the reasons that boys are not members. Some have different family backgrounds – West Indian or Puerto Rican. At least one

TABLE 1. *Relation of central peer groups to all boys six to nineteen in 1390 5th Ave.*

Boys' age	2	3	4	5	Floor 6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
6	*	*					*			*			4
7	*				**						*		4
8						*		*	**	*			5
9		*				*	T		*̃	TT	*	**	9
10		*	*̇		*̇			TT		T	**̇		8
11				*	TT		T			T	*̇	T	7
12							T	T			*̇		3
13	***̃	T		*		* */T	T̃				*	T	11
14	*	*	*	*	*		*		*	*	**	**	12
15	**	*			*	*	*		**			**	10
16	*	**				O		*	**	O		*O	10
17						O		*O	O	*̃		*	6
18				*		O				**̃			5
19													0
													94

T Thunderbird   *T̃ Puerto Rican
O Oscar Brother   *̇ West Indian
* non-member   */ kept at home

is kept at home by his parents. Some go to Catholic schools. In any case, it is evident that the Thunderbirds are the only self-organized peer-group in their age range, and the rest are isolated individuals, who are lames by definition. We interviewed four of these boys individually; we will refer to them below as the '1390 Lames'.

Membership is demonstrated by actual participation in group activities, but it

[7] The 'Oscar Brothers' are not in fact a named group like the Thunderbirds. They are an informal hang-out group of older boys, including several older brothers of the Thunderbirds, who have helped them out once or twice in fights with other groups in the neighborhood. No one is sure how the name 'Oscar Brothers' originated; it probably refers to the Big O (Oscar Robertson). The Oscar Brothers themselves say the name is used only by the younger boys. In accounts of great fights in the history of the Thunderbirds, the leader Boot is quoted as saying, 'Go get the Oscar Brothers!'

We can plot answers to 'Who are all the cats (guys) you hang out with?' on socio-metric diagrams such as Figure 1, which shows members of the Thunderbirds appears quite clearly in answers to the hang-out question in individual interviews. from 10 to 13.[8] The double lines show symmetrical naming; the lighter lines
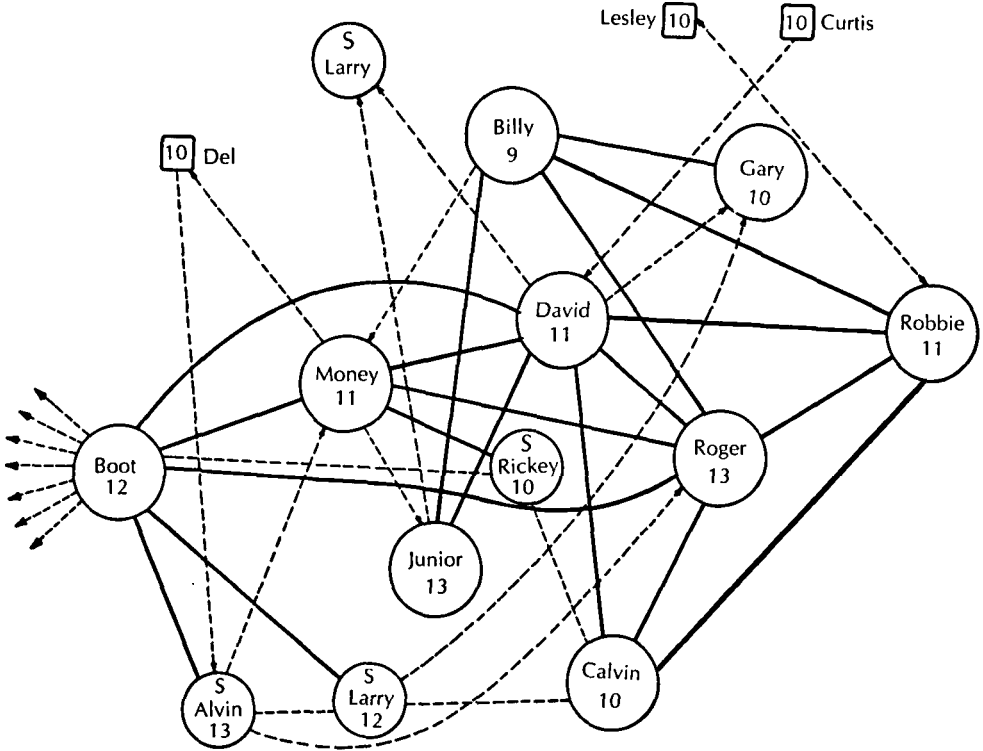

FIGURE 1. Hang-out pattern for the Thunderbirds.

with arrow heads indicate a naming by someone who is not named in return. The leaders Boot and Roger and central members Money, David, Ricky, Junior, Calvin are bound by a network of mutual namings. A younger sub-group is formed by Billy, Gary, and Robbie. The isolated position of lames Del, Lesley, and Curtis is apparent.

LINGUISTIC DIFFERENTIATION OF PRE-ADOLESCENT MEMBERS AND LAMES

We can make the most precise comparison of lames and peer-group members by

[8] There are several nine-year-olds involved who were not interviewed. The verbal leader Boot has a great many connections with outsiders, while the non-verbal leader, Roger, is located entirely within the Thunderbirds.

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pairing the 1390 Lames with the Thunderbirds. The Aces, who were located in the neighboring project building, are a peer group which we can expect to match the Thunderbirds. On the other hand, the Vacation Day Camp series [VDC] should be intermediate, since it includes some local boys we know as members as well as a good many lames. The VDC series also covers a much wider area than the Jet and Cobra and Thunderbird territory and some boys report membership in named groups that we are not familiar with.

In the following analysis we will then present four groups of pre-adolescent speakers: The Thunderbirds, the Aces, ten boys from the VDC series and the 1390 Lames. It must be remembered that all of these boys appear to speak the BE vernacular at first hearing. None of them are middle-class or standard speakers who would stand out from the others as obviously speaking a different dialect; the linguistic differences we will show here emerge only on close analysis. All groups use the same linguistic variables and the differences in the system are internal variations in the organization of similar rules: differential weightings of variable constraints.

To illustrate this general point, consider the following fight story from Lesley C., one of the 1390 Lames:

> See, Book pushed the door and Calvin pushed it back on him an' then they start pushing each other an' then they started to fight...Book was holding Calvin by the neck and Calvin had his han' up at his face...Book was almost crying and then Book got a cut right down his nose. (Who won that fight?) I say it was Calvin 'cause he ain't cry or bleed.

There are no grammatical items here which distinguish Lesley's speech from the BE vernacular; it has the characteristic syntax of a BE fight narrative, and ends in fact with one of the most marked BE forms, *ain't* for *didn't*. But Lesley is a lame,[9] and his language reflects this fact. To see how it does so, we will have to look more closely at the lame use of BE variable rules.

Table 2 shows some of the phonological indices that differentiate these four groups. The variables presented here are the same as those which operate in the white community and have been extensively studied in New York City (Labov 1966), Detroit (Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley 1966) and elsewhere. A detailed description of the first three variables in the adult white community is given in Labov 1966. For a description of the variables of Table 2 in the Black community see Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968 and Labov 1973.

The comparisons of Table 2 do not give data on Style A, the speech used in

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[9] Lesley is far enough outside of the group that he has gotten Boot's name wrong. It is usually pronounced without any final consonant [bu], and for a long time we ourselves thought his name was *Boo*, but one day he visited us with sneakers labelled across the toes BOOT. Lesley has re-constructed a [k] for the final consonant, a common form of hypercorrection in a dialect where *den* has become *dent*.

group sessions, since the lames were recorded only in individual interviews; they include three progressively more formal styles where an increasing amount of attention is paid to speech. Style B is the main body of conversation, Style C is reading style, and Style D includes word lists and minimal pairs where the maximum amount of attention is concentrated on the variable.

The first two variables deal with post-vocalic *r*, which yields fine-grained stylistic and social stratification in many areas where the vernacular is or has been *r*-less – New England, the upper and lower South, Hawaii, and New York

TABLE 2. *Linguistic correlates of peer-group status: phonological variables for pre-adolescents*

Variable		Style	Aces	T-Birds	VDC Series	1390 Lames
1a. (r # # V)		B	06	04	07	21
b. (r)		B	00	00	01	06
		C	03	10	17	31
		D	26	23	20	51
2. (dh)		B	144	114	140	84
		C	92	57	20	38
		D	108	70	77	44
		All	115	81	79	55
3. (ing)		B	00	04	24	(22)
4a. (KD$_{mm}$)	_K	B	98	94	99	93
b.	_V	B	64	59	35	61
c. (KD$_b$)	_K	B	81	74	81	19
d.	_V	B	24	24	24	16
4b–4c			−17	−15	−46	+42
No. of speakers			4	8	10	4

City. The Black community generally shows a higher degree of *r*-lessness than the white community, and a sharper slope of style shifting between conversational and reading styles (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968, I: 103). In general, it can be said that the *r* variables are more important in the Black community than anywhere else as indicators of formal, educated speech. This is even more true in Black communities in *r*-pronouncing areas, such as Philadelphia or Los Angeles.

The first index is (r # # V) – the percentage of final constricted [r] in final position when the next word begins with a vowel, as in *four o'clock*. This variable operates at a very high level in the white community, but in connected speech the Aces, T-Birds and VDC groups all show a low figure from 04 to 07. Only the 1390 Lames use a sizeable percentage of contricted [r], at (r # # V) – 21.

The general *r* variable is (r), the percentage of constricted [r] in post-vocalic position where the next word does not begin with a vowel; in *car*, *card*, *fear*

beard, etc. This always operates at lower levels than (r≠≠V), and in Table 2 the peer groups are at oo, just as in the BE vernacular. Only the lames show any signs of [r] in speech. But in more formal styles, we see a regular slope of upward shifting. Figure 2 shows that the slope of style shifting for the 1390 Lames is twice that of the other groups, so that in Style D, the lames use [r] half of the time.

The (dh) index represents a stigmatized feature, the frequency of stops and affricates for the initial consonant of /ð/ in *this*, *then*, etc. (Unlike the other indices, it does not run from o to 100, but o to 200.) It does not form as regular a pattern as the *r* variables among adolescents, but Table 2 clearly shows that the 1390
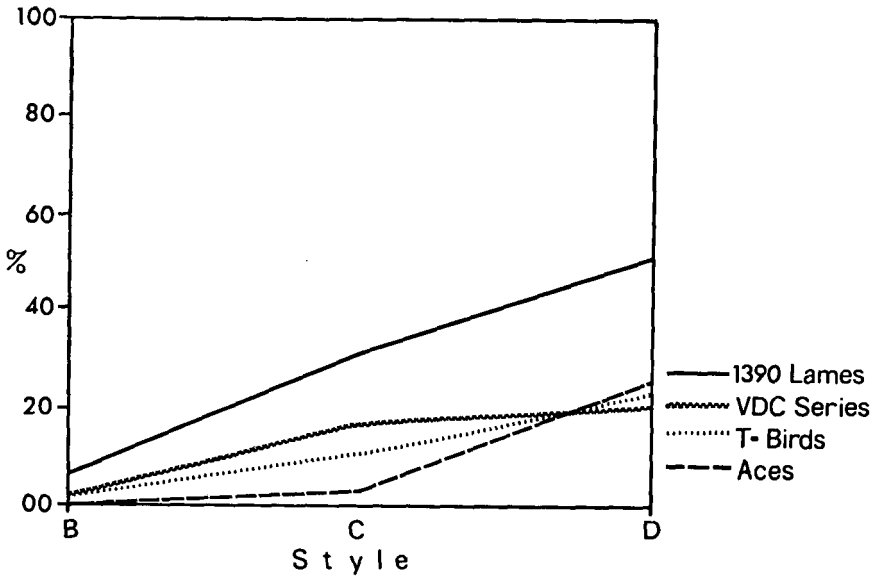

FIGURE 2. Use of the variable (r) by pre-adolescent groups.

Lames are lower than the Aces and T-Birds in their use of this feature. The VDC series is lower than the others only in reading style, but as a whole resembles the peer groups more than the lames.

Perhaps the most sensitive sociolinguistic variable for BE groups is (ing) – the percentage of [ɪŋ] variants for unstressed /ing/. It is typical of BE speakers to go from (ing)-oo in casual speech to (ing)-100 in reading. All of these pre-adolescent speakers show an (ing) index of 100 or close to it in their reading styles C and D, and Table 2 therefore shows only Style B. The T-Birds and Aces adhere close to the vernacular level, but the VDC speakers and the 1390 Lames use the prestige variant almost one quarter of the time.

The last five lines of Table 2 concern the deletion of -*t*,*d* in final consonant clusters. This (KD) variable is subdivided into four sub-variables, depending

on the values of two environmental features: the absence or presence of a grammatical boundary before the final /t/ or /d/ (*passed* vs. *past*) and the absence or presence of a following vowel (*passed me* vs. *passed over*). The combination of these gives us the four sub-categories shown in Table 2:

(KD_{mm})—K past me
(KD_{mm})—V past us
(KD_p) —K passed me
(KD_p) —V passed us

The index numbers represent the average frequency of deletion of /t/ or /d/ in these contexts. All follow the regular rule by showing lower figures before a vowel than before a consonant, and lower figures for KD_p than KD_{mm}. The over-all level of *t,d* deletion is also remarkably similar. But a very important difference between the 1390 Lames and the others appears in the cross-products – that is, the cases where one factor favors the operation of the rule and the other does not. In these intermediate cases, we can see which of the two constraints on the variable rule is more important. It is plainly the phonological constraint for the T-Birds and the Aces, and the VDC series and the effect of the grammatical boundary is much less by comparison. But for the 1390 Lames, the presence of a grammatical boundary is much more important, and KD_p—K is much lower than KD_{mm}—V. In this respect, the 1390 Lames show the same pattern as the white non-standard vernacular of New York City.[10] Thus we see a characteristic difference in the weighting of the variable constraints on the *t,d* deletion rule:

(1) BEV rule of Aces, Thunderbirds and VDC:
$$t,d \rightarrow <\phi>/[+\text{cons}]<\phi>_2 \underline{\quad}< -\text{syl}>_1$$

(2) General rule of 1390 Lames, adults and white groups
$$t,d \rightarrow <\phi>/[+\text{cons}]<\phi>_1 \underline{\quad}< -\text{syl}>_2$$

This qualitative difference in the organization of the deletion rule emerges from a quantitative study of natural speech. It represents a regular development with age as well as a difference among social groups, since even the peer-group members shift to rule (2) when they become adults. The predominant standard English pattern is heavily against deletion in past tense forms, and its influence is thus felt in the internal re-organization of the vernacular rule; since the 1390

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[10] Studies of other white non-standard dialects (South Central Texas, Atlanta, Columbus, Detroit) show that the grammatical constraint is regularly predominant over the phonological constraint, just as with the white control group (the Inwood group) in the New York City studies.

Lames are isolated from the BE vernacular and are most sensitive to SE influence, they are aligned in the SE direction from the outset.[11]

In the over-all pattern of Table 2, it is evident that the VDC series is closer to the BE peer groups than to the 1390 Lames. There are at least four different measures where the VDC subjects shift in the direction of the lames and away from the peer-groups, and no examples of the opposite direction. But for every variable, the T-Birds and the Aces are remarkably similar.

If we now re-examine the speech of Lesley C. on page 88, his distance from the vernacular will become evident in his use of (ing) and the -t,d deletion rule. Lesley uses the formal [ɪŋ] variant three times in a row in this short passage: this is simply not done by peer group members, who stay close to (ing)-oo except in reading style. Lesley preserves consonant clusters in *pushed it* and *almost crying*: the first case favors retention of the cluster, but in the second (monomorphemic before a consonant), deletion of the -t is almost categorical for peer group members. The use of the preterit *ain't* shows that Lesley is within the BE system, but his use of that system is lame.

The contraction and deletion rules. One of the most complex and sensitive indexes of the vernacular is the use of the rules which contract and delete *is*, the finite form of the copula and the auxiliary *be*. Here the comparison will be confined to two groups – the Thunderbirds and the 1390 Lames, who are directly opposed in their relation to the BE sub-culture. The upper half of Table 3 shows the actual number of full forms (F), contracted forms (C), and deleted forms (D) for both the Thunderbirds and 1390 Lames, sub-classified in a variety of grammatical environments. We subdivide the cases into those which begin with a full noun phrase (NP__) and those which begin with a pronoun (pro__). Within each of these, we consider three possibilities: that the following element is (1) a noun phrase or sentence (__NP, S), (2) a predicate adjective or locative (__PA, Loc), or a (3) verb with -*ing* or *gonna* (__Vŋ, gn). Our general study of contraction and deletion of the copula shows that there is progressively more contraction and deletion in these three environments, and more after pronouns than after full noun phrases. The form of the rule in the analysis of contraction and deletion presented elsewhere (Labov 1969), shows that the rule which deletes the *is* is dependent upon the contraction rule, and operates only upon auxiliaries with single consonants produced by contraction. The formal expression of these complex relations may then be shown as:

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[11] The influence on the 1390 Lames may come from several directions: parents, the mass media, teachers, or other adolescents outside of the BE influence. The fact that their pattern matches that of the white non-standard speakers in many details does not necessarily show any direct influence, since they are moving towards SE along the same axes from a greater distance.

TABLE 3. *Use of contraction and deletion rules by Thunderbirds and 1390 Lames*

		Thunderbirds				1390 Lames			
		Number of forms							
		F	C	D	n	F	C	D	n
is̲ NP——		68	100	110	278	18	30	4	52
	—NP, S	43	16	3	62	9	3	1	13
	—PA, Loc	10	9	6	25	5	2	0	7
	—Vŋ, gn	0	0	4	4	0	1	0	1
Pro——									
	—NP, S	4	46	29	79	1	8	1	10
	—PA, Loc	11	21	29	61	3	9	1	13
	—Vŋ, gn	0	8	39	47	0	7	1	8

Use of the contraction and deletion rules

		Φ_C (C+D)/n	Φ_D D/(C+D)	Φ_C (C+D)/n	Φ_D D/(C+D)
is̲ NP——		0.73	0.52	0.65	0.12
	—NP, S	0.31	0.16	0.31	0.25
	—PA, Loc	0.40	0.39	0.29	(0.00)
	—Vŋ, gn	1.00	1.00	(1.00)	(0.00)
Pro——					
	—NP, S	0.95	0.39	0.90	0.11
	—PA, Loc	0.82	0.58	0.77	0.10
	—Vŋ, gn	1.00	0.83	1.00	0.12

F: full form
C: contracted form
D: deleted form

(3) Auxiliary contraction

$$ə → <\phi> / <+\text{Pro}> \# \# \underline{\quad [+\overline{\text{Tns}}] \quad} C_0^1 \# \# \begin{array}{c} <+\text{Vb}> \\ <-\text{NP}> \end{array}$$

(4) Deletion

$$z → <\phi> / <+\text{Pro}> \# \# \underline{\quad\quad} \# \# \begin{array}{c} <+\text{Vb}> \\ <-\text{NP}> \end{array}$$

We may read back these rules in ordinary language by saying that a reduced vowel is variably deleted before a single consonant if the tense marker is present, more often if a pronoun precedes, and less often if a noun phrase follows. The

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lone /z/ which survives from the contraction of *is* can then be deleted under the same variable constraints. The contraction rule is essentially the same as that which operates in the white dialects; the deletion rule is found only in BE[12] and appears to be uniform throughout the various BE vernacular communities (see Labov 1969 for New York City; Wolfram 1969 for Detroit; Mitchell Kernan 1969 for San Francisco; Legum 1971 for Los Angeles). The differences which we will examine have to do with the level of use of the two rules, rather than their specific forms.

The frequencies at which such variable rules operate can be expressed by the quantity Φ, ranging between 0 and 1; the lower half of Table 3 gives over-all values of Φ for the contraction rule, operating upon F to give C and for the deletion rule, operating upon C to give D.

The data on contraction for the 1390 Lames is limited, but it is sufficient to show that they use this rule in the same way as the Thunderbirds. The over-all frequency of the contraction rule for the Thunderbirds is 0.73, and for the lames 0.65; furthermore, they follow the same pattern throughout the six sub-cases.[13] But the Thunderbirds and Lames are diametrically opposed in their use of the deletion rule: 0.52 for the Thunderbirds, and only 0.12 for the lames. And where the Thunderbirds follow the regular pattern of variable constraints that we find in all other speakers of the BE vernacular, the 1390 Lames do not. Figure 3 contrasts the use of the deletion rule for the lames and T-Birds for the six sub-cases, and adds a comparison on the absence of *are*. The lames' use of the rule is minimal: they delete the copula often enough so that it is evident that the rule is present in their system, but it is plainly being suppressed. In this respect, as in the case of -*t,d* deletion, the 1390 Lames have brought their rule system into alignment with that of the dominant white society.

There are also a number of grammatical features of BE which demonstrate the linguistic differentiation of the lames. For these grammatical variables we can contrast twelve of the Thunderbirds with four 1390 Lames.

(*a*) BE uses the dummy subject *it* where Standard English uses *there*, as in

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[12] The few systematic studies of syntax in Southern white communities show that *is* is not deleted in any regular pattern, but that *are* is absent quite regularly. The deletion of *are* may be the result of an extension of the contraction rule, or the contraction rule following on the rule for deletion of post-vocalic schwa (Labov 1969). Contraction may also be responsible for the reported absence of *is* after *this* in some speakers (Sledd, personal communication). Contraction is normally constrained in this position, but when it does happen, voicing assimilation and the simplification of geminates would remove the resulting sibilant. We should expect, of course, that some white speakers will be influenced by Blacks in this respect, and that the deletion of *is* will be found in the South. But on current evidence, it is a Black pattern.

[13] As we can see here, contraction and deletion are similar rules and respond to the same general grammatical constraints – a preceding pronoun and a following verb both favor the rule.
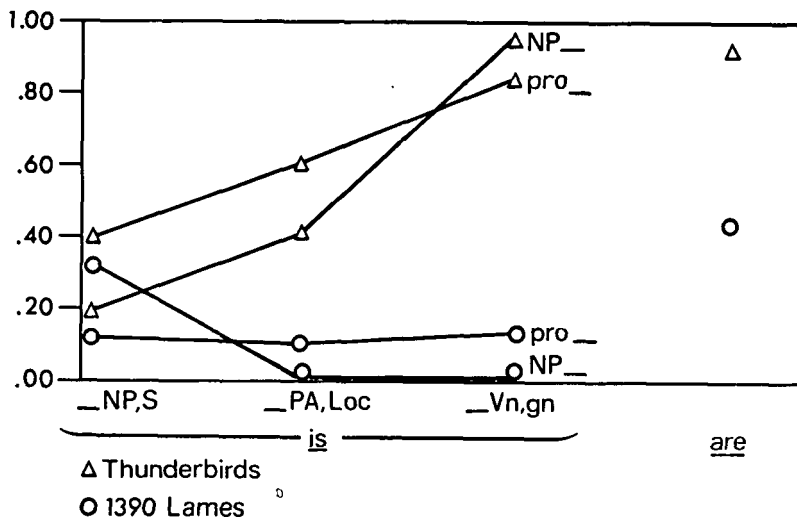
FIGURE 3. Use of deletion rule for *is* and *are* by pre-adolescent Thunderbirds and 1390 Lames.

It's a difference, or *It's a policeman at the door*. This is not a categorical rule, but it rises to a very high frequency in the BE vernacular. The T-Birds use 79 per cent *it* and only 21 per cent *there*; the 1390 Lames use 91 per cent *there* and only 9 per cent *it*.

(*b*) In BE, the rule of negative concord operates regularly to indefinites *any* and *ever* within the clause, so that *Nobody knows nothing about it* is expected in place of *Nobody knows anything*...In all white non-standard dialects, this is an optional rule. The T-Birds apply the negative concord rule in 98 per cent of these cases, the 1390 Lames only 76 per cent of the time. We have here a qualitative contrast between a semi-categorical use of the rule and a variable one.

(*c*) One of the characteristic features of informal Southern syntax is the use of inverted word order in embedded questions: *I asked him could he do it* instead of Northern states *I asked him if he could do it*. This is the normal use in the BE vernacular but is heard only rarely in northern white dialects. The Thunderbirds use the inverted order without *if* 80 per cent of the time, the 1390 Lames only 20 per cent.

The absence of agreement in the vernacular. Perhaps the sharpest contrast between the language of members and lames can be found in a series of measures which concern agreement of the most common irregular verbs with third-person singular subjects. In general, we can say that the BE vernacular has no agreement between subject and verb. There is one exception: some agreement is clearly registered in the finite forms of *be*. Here the first singular regularly has contracted

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'm, third singular has *is* or *'s* when realized, and other persons when realized mostly have *are,* sometimes *is.* Aside from this, we have invariant verb forms with no relation to the person and number of the subject. Forms in *-s* are rarely found for *have, do, don't, want* or *say.* The invariant form for *be* in the past is *was,* not *were.* These facts are illustrated by Tables 4 and 5, which show the actual forms used by 31 club members, including T-Birds, Aces, Jets and Cobras. A total of 10 *-s* forms are found for all thirty-one club members for the five verbs, as against 395 zero forms – hardly enough to indicate any basis for subject-verb agreement. The ratios of zero to *-s* forms for the five successive verbs are 21/5, 20/0, 61/2, 16/2, and 26/1. In Table 5, *was* predominates and *were* is used occasionally in all environments.

The second line of Tables 4 and 5 shows the figures for three Oscar Brothers. As an older, informal peer group they were already beinning to modify their speech in the direction characteristic of adults. They show 22 *-s* forms altogether in Table 4, though the predominant use is still the zero form in all cases except *want.* In Table 5, they show a clear tendency towards the use of *were* with the plural and 2nd singular.

The third line of Table 4 and 5 show the figures for ten lames, drawn from the T-Bird, Cobra and Jet areas. There is a clear reversal of the BE pattern for *have* and *want,* where *has* and *wants* are preferred in third singular contexts. There is also a pronounced shift towards *doesn't.* In Table 4, only *do* and *say* keep their vernacular forms. In Table 5, the lames have clearly adopted subject–verb agreement. They show almost no *were* with 1st and 3rd singular, and use mainly *were* forms elsewhere.

The last line of Table 4 and 5 give us a comparison with the white Inwood

TABLE 4. *Person-number agreement of* have, do, want, say *for BE peer group members and other groups*

		have		do		don't		want	say
	Form used	+3s	−3s	+3s	−3s	+3s	−3s	+3s	+3s
Club members (31)	−s:	5	0	0	0	2	0	2	1
	φ:	21	44	20	44	61	163	16	26
Oscar Brothers (3)	−s:	6	0	2	1	7	0	3	3
	φ:	10	41	4	20	11	83	0	9
Lames (10)	−s:	6	0	1	0	10	0	7	0
	φ:	4	29	8	8	18	107	4	12
Inwood (8)	−s:	26	0	13	0	8	0	6	19
	φ:	0	23	0	40	17	74	2	0

+3s = third singular
−3s = other

TABLE 5. *Person-number agreement for* was *and* wasn't *for* BE *peer group members and other groups*

| | | Environment | | | | | |
| | | 1st sing. | | 3rd sing. | | elsewhere | |
	Form used	Aux	Verb	Aux	Verb	Aux	Verb
Club members (31)	was:	40	54	54	117	54	51
	were:	2	2	13	5	9	8
Oscar Brothers (3)	was:	11	13	8	32	2	3
	were:	0	0	0	0	7	6
Lames (10)	was:	13	19	28	20	3	5
	were:	1	0	0	0	15	4
Inwood (8)	was:	11	24	25	76	0	4
	were:	0	0	0	0	21	8

groups, speakers of the non-standard New York City vernacular. There is no deviation from the standard pattern of agreement for *have*, *do*, or *say*. A few anomalies appear for *want* and *was/were*. The only place where there is any sizeable lack of agreement is with the predominant use of *don't* for *doesn't* with third singular subjects. Note that the Lames match the Inwood group closely on this verb, and differ from the Inwood group only on *do* and *say*.

The pattern of agreement and disagreement can be summed up in Table 6, which shows the use of the standard marker of agreement for the five auxiliaries studied in Tables 4 and 5. The club members use these forms with very low frequency. The Lames use *has* and *were*, and show some use of *doesn't*. The white Inwood group uses all of them except *doesn't*, where its use is about that of the lames.

We can therefore conclude that the use of *has*, *were*, and *doesn't* is a clear sign of the shifting away from the BE vernacular which distinguishes lames from members.

TABLE 6. *Use of standard verb forms by club members, Lames and whites*

| | per cent use | | |
Present tense forms of verb	Club members	Per cent Lames	Inwood [white]
has [3rd sg.]	19	60	100
doesn't [3rd sg.]	03	36	32
were [2nd sg., pl.]	14	83	100
does [3rd sg.]	00	13	100
says [3rd sg.]	04	00	100
[No. of subjects:	31	10	8]

There are many more such indicators which we might select from our grammatical studies of BE, but by now the over-all pattern should be apparent. *Categorical or semi-categorical rules of BE are weakened to variable rules by the Lames; variable rules that are in strong use in BE are reduced to a low level by the Lames.* Whenever there is a contrast between SE and BE, the language of the lames is shifted dramatically towards SE. In many cases, this leads to a close alignment between the Lames and white non-standard vernaculars. This does not necessarily imply that the Lames are modeling their behavior directly on the white non-standard speakers, but rather that their interaction with SE patterns brings them from a point farther away from SE to roughly the same distance as members of the white vernacular culture.

INSIDE THE JETS[14]

Having determined that the Lames are indeed marked linguistically by their distance from the vernacular culture, we can ask whether the same principle may not operate within the central peer groups as well. If peer group pressures are important in maintaining the vernacular in its present uniform state, and in resisting the pressures of other dialects, then those who are most bound by the norms of the group should show the most consistent form of the vernacular. It is the leaders of vernacular peer groups who are most closely governed by group norms, as Whyte (1955) and others have shown. We might therefore ask what linguistic consequences follow if we decompose the group into leaders and
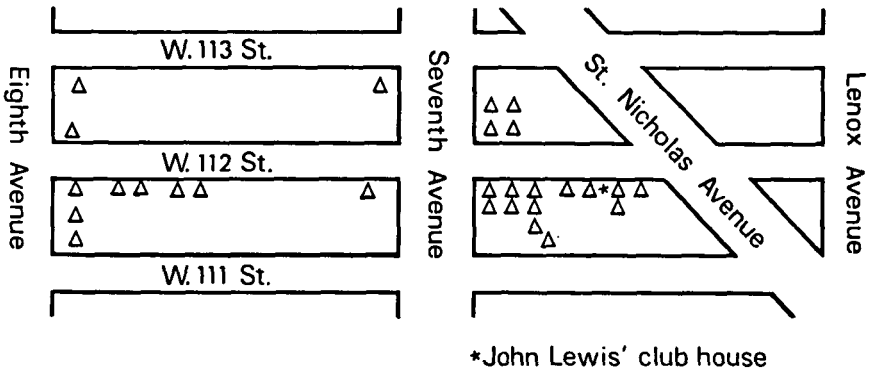

*John Lewis' club house

FIGURE 4. Location of the Jets in South Central Harlem.

[14] The analyses of the social structure of the Jets, and the conceptual framework used here are the work of Teresa Labov, to whom I am greatly indebted. For further analysis of peer terminology, club names, the associative plural *and 'em*, and the relations of hang-out groups to the club, see 'When is the Jets?' Social Ambiguity in Peer Terminology', unpublished Columbia University Master's Essay, 1969.

followers, core and periphery, and see if peer group pressures can make such fine discriminations.

The largest of the groups that we studied in South Central Harlem was the Jets, the adolescent club which dominated West 112th Street between Eight and St Nicholas. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the Jet membership in that area; altogether, 36 persons were interviewed. There are plainly two centers from a geographic point of view: one is concentrated on the short block between Seventh and St Nicholas Avenues – the 100's block – , and the other at the far end of the 200's block, near Eighth Avenue.[15] These areas also represent two separate sub-groups in social organization.

The Jets is a street club, organized by the members, without adult initiation, supervision, or guidance. As a named club, the Jets have the following features:

1. Leaders: a president, vice-president, war-lord, and prime minister.
2. Members.
3. A name.
4. A history and mythology.
5. A song.
6. Initiation ceremonies.
7. An associated junior club.

This history of the Jets goes back to 1958. It was formed as a Junior Club to the Red Devils, which was then headed by Mickey Collins. Mickey's younger brother Stanley became the president of the junior club and has continued to be the number one man in all the various changes that the group has been through. The Little Red Devils, with about 16 members, were renamed the Little Diamonds in 1960; in 1962 became in rapid succession the Jets, the Cobra-stetas, the Horsemen, and again the Jets.[16] Shortly before we contacted them in 1965, the numbers of the Jets were doubled by the joining up of the 200's block, giving a total membership of 35 to 40.

The internal structure of the Jets is much more complex than we first realized: it is a product of geography, local interests, and primary group alliances. The club is actually a superordinate organization, the largest unit of social structure in the vernacular culture, called into existence only on ritual occasions or at moments of crisis in conflict with another group. Members normally associate in hang-out groups, smaller aggregates who are involved in a range of daily transactions quite distinct from the Jet activities. As we will see below, the prim-

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[15] There are also one or two scattered members to the north, including the president Stanley, but this is a result of recent re-location by the family. The apartment rented by John Lewis (the club house) is located in the middle of the 100's block.

[16] The Cobras, located on 115–116th Sts., was at one time a brother club but at the time of the study was in conflict with the Jets. In 1962, the Cobras were known as *the Jets* for a time, which explains the rapid shifting of names.
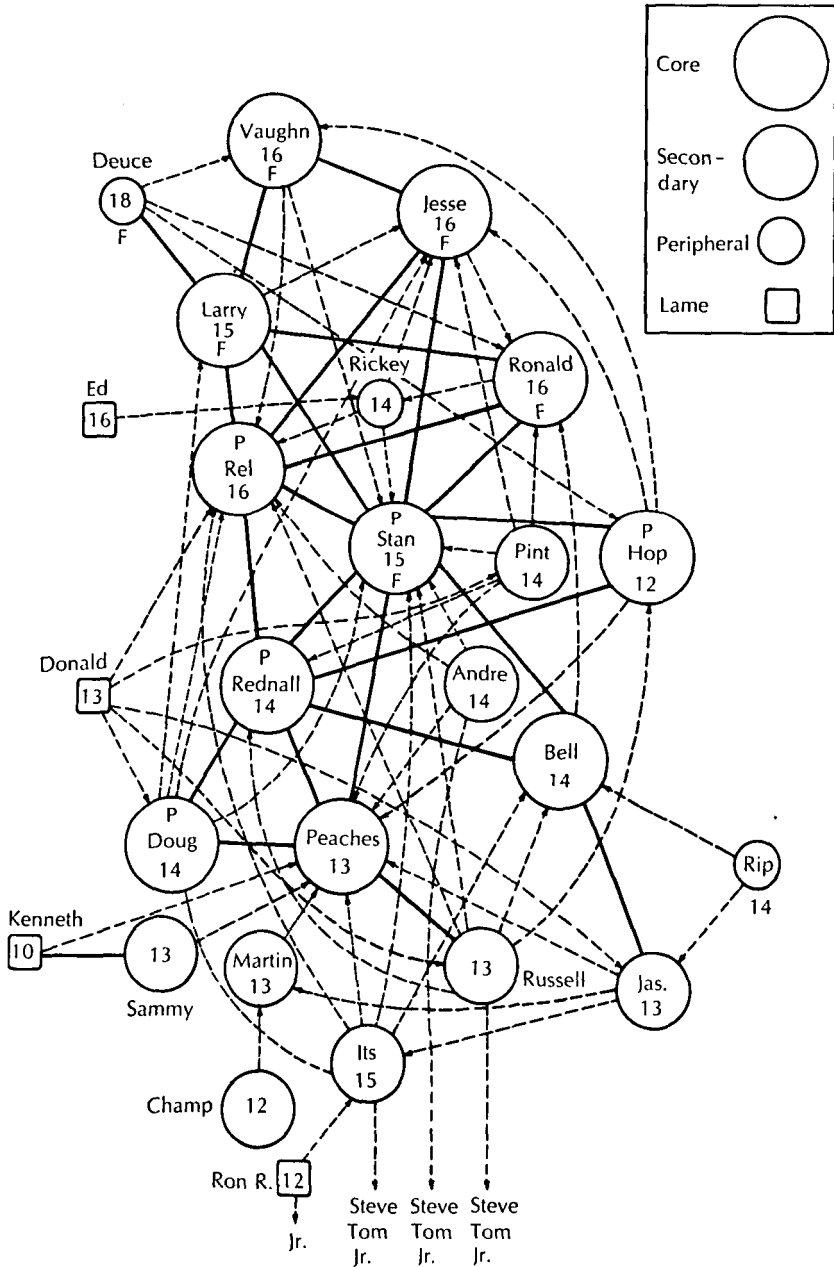
FIGURE 5. Hang-out pattern for the Jets: 100's block.

ary influence and major control on linguistic behavior is exercised by these hang-out groups.

Our most systematic information on the structure of the hang-out groups is derived from two questions: 'Is there a bunch of cats you hang out with?' and 'Of all the cats you hang with, who's the leader?' This data yields sociometric diagrams such as Figure 5, which shows the hang-out groups in the 100's block. Again, the main social links are the reciprocal namings, shown as heavy dark lines. Connections with the 200's block are quite weak: there are no such reciprocal namings between the 100's and 200's. Figure 5 shows that the leader, Stanley, is a pivotal member of two distinct hang-out groups of core members. One is the 'six best fighters': Deuce, Vaughn, Larry, Jesse, Ronald and Stanley. The other is a group of five that owns and flies pigeons on the roof-tops: Stanley, Hop, Rednall, Doug and Rel. At the lower end of Figure 5 is a group of younger members, from 12 to 14; the core members at the upper end are 15 to 16 years old. The complete pattern of namings is shown in Table 7, in which the Jets are broken down into *core*, *secondary*, and *peripheral* members.

Core members are clearly marked in the number of reciprocal namings, with at least two, and as many as eight; secondary and peripheral members have only one or two.

The secondary members of the Jets are located entirely within the structure where they hold an inferior status; this is their primary 'social address'. Peripheral members, on the other hand, are partially detached from the group because they are older, live at a distance, or have other interests, but not because they have lower status.[17] They are less under the control of the group, and we may therefore expect them to be less dominated by it in their linguistic patterns.

On the outer edge of the networks in Figure 5 we see a few lames who name some Jets in the hang-out question, but are not normally mentioned in turn by anyone (with one exception, by a peripheral member). These are definitely not considered members by anyone, do not fight with the Jets, do not participate in any of the hang-out groups, and are plainly not members of the vernacular culture.[18] In addition, we interviewed a number of lames in the Jet area who do not appear in Figure 5 at all, and have no connection with the Jets though they knew of them. We thus have eight Lames in the Jet area to contrast linguistically with the members.

We can dispense with the sociometric diagram for the 200's block, whose

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[17] Senior members such as Deuce are actually peripheral in this sense. Other members of the Jet age range who are under pressure from parents to break away, but resist this pressure, may also hold a respected position, as with Ricky S.

[18] Ed and Donald are connected with the pattern only in that they name others but are not named by anyone in return. Kenneth, 10, forms one of two exceptions, since he hangs out with the secondary member Sammy. It should be emphasized that these socio-metric patterns are not the only defining characteristics of the members; more substantive accounts of their activity are essential elements in this assignment.

TABLE 7. *Names given and received by Jets in answers to the hang-out question*

	Name	Age	G	R	Rp	Name	Age	G	R	Rp
	JETS: 100's Core					JETS: 200's Core				
	Stanley	15	8	15	8	Junior D.	15	2	12	2
	Jesse H.	16	6	9	3	Ronald F.	14	8	6	2
F	Vaughn	16	4	4	2	Tommy	13	5	13	3
	Ronald W.	16	4	7	3	Stevie W.	13	4	14	4
	Larry H.	15	16	5	4	Tinker	13	6	7	3
	Rel	16	6	15	5					
	Rednall	14	6	10	6					
P	Doug	14	6	4	2					
	Bell	14	7	10	3					
	Peaches	13	4	16	4					
	Hop	12	8	5	2					
	JETS: 100's Secondary					JETS: 200's Secondary				
	Martin B.	13	1	2	0	Ulysses	13	8	0	0
	Russell	13	9	4	1	Poochee	13	8	0	0
	James	13	7	4	1	Turkey	13	7	3	0
	Champ	12	3	0	0	Laundro	13	9	2	0
	Sammy	12	2	1	1					
	Pint	14	6	1	0					
	Its	15	9	1	0					
	Andre	14	13	2	0					
	JETS: 100's Peripheral					JETS: 200's Peripheral				
	Deuce	18	8	2	1	Ray	14	5	1	1
F	Rickey S.	16	3	2	0	Leon	13	10	3	1
	Rip	14	9	0	0	William G.	12	10	2	0
						Alfred	12	8	0	0
	JET AREA Lames									
	David D.	17	0	0	0					
	Steve Y.	17	0	0	0					
	Ed S.	16	1	0	0					
	Larry W.	15	10	1	1					
	John McN.	14	3	0	0					
	Donald G.	13	11	0	0					
	Ronald R.	12	5	0	0					
	Kenneth A.	10	6	1	1					

G: no. of names given
R: no. of times named
Rp: reciprocal namings
F: six best fighters
P: pigeon flyers

naming pattern is included in Table 7. The same principles apply to the division of the 200's membership.

In section 3, we found that the frequencies of the contraction and deletion of *is* were among the most sensitive indicators of the speaker's relation to the BE vernacular and the vernacular sub-culture. The use of the contraction rules was similar for members and lames, but there was a qualitative difference in the use of the deletion rule. We are now in a position to use that index to look for finer linguistic correlates of peer group membership.

Table 8 shows the use of contraction and deletion by the six sub-categories of Jet membership developed in Table 7. Again, we note no significant differences in the use of the contraction rule, which is the common property of all dialects. But the deletion rule is tightly correlated with sub-divisions of Jet membership. The leaders of the group in the 100's core show the highest use of this rule, the 200's core slightly lower and both sets of secondary members again considerably lower use. The most striking fact is that the peripheral members and lames use the deletion rule less than half as much as core members.

TABLE 8. *Use of contraction and deletion rules for* is
by sub-divisions of the Jets and Lames

	No. of forms	Φ_C	Φ_D
100's Core	259	0.66	0.70
200's Core	81	0.63	0.63
100's Secondary	75	0.75	0.61
200's Secondary	148	0.72	0.56
Peripheral	82	0.80	0.33
Lame	127	0.57	0.36

If we now compare Table 8 with Tables 4 and 5, it is evident that the Oscar Brothers and the peripheral members of the Jets are in the same relative position. These are older, somewhat wiser members who have begun to emerge from their total immersion in the vernacular culture. They are not Lames – they have not lost their knowledge of local ways and doings; but they have begun to show the effects of a greater awareness of the larger cultural matrix in which the Black English vernacular is embedded. They would normally be considered 'bi-dialectal' and they would give outside observers the strong impression that they were capable of switching abruptly between the vernacular and a more standard dialect. But even the most casual style in group sessions among these older members shows a distinct shift away from the vernacular. *In general, we do not find bidialectalism in the simple sense of switching from a new to an older dialect.* Learning a new set of closely related rules inevitably influences the form of the old rules. Turning to the Lames, we observe the same kind of shift away from

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the vernacular – but at a younger age, with different consequences. The Lames have not passed through the same period of adolescent immersion in the BE vernacular culture. Though they arrive at a similar grammatical stance, the Lames do not have the deep experience of the vernacular culture which peripheral members have absorbed. How much of this early knowledge can be retrieved from older members who have shifted away from the vernacular in their own personal use of the BE rules? We will return to this important question in the last section.

Not all of the features of the BE vernacular show a regular gradation from the core members of the Jets outward. Some vernacular rules are intact for everyone. One such case is negative concord within the clause, which operates categorically in the BE vernacular to yield *Nobody never saw nothin' like that* instead of *Nobody ever saw anything like that*. Thirty-one of the thirty-seven individuals interviewed in the Jet area showed 100 per cent use of this rule; the remaining six are all individual cases and do not show any kind of pattern.

There are also some markers of the BE vernacular which are common to all members, but whose use differentiates the Lames sharply, giving the kind of pattern that we saw in section 3. For example, all members of the Jets use dummy *it* much more often than dummy *there* in *It's a difference*, etc. The members range from 60 to 84 per cent use of dummy *it*; but the Lames use *it* only 23 per cent of the time.

If the primary mechanism of social control is the hang-out group, we should find local differentiation of clubs and of units within the club. It is not difficult to locate examples of specific linguistic features which are generalized throughout a primary group. The Cobras, for example, may be differentiated from the Jets in their tendency to use *skr-* for *str-* in *street*, etc. – a coastal South Carolina feature which has been adopted by members, including those with no family background in that area. In general, we find no correlation between linguistic features used by members and the geographic background of their family; whatever regional influence appears is quickly generalized throughout the group.

A more specific highly localized feature is the pronunciation *an'shi-it* [æniš:t] for the common tag, *an'shit*. A small tightly-knit sub-group within the six best fighters of the Jets' core members uses this form regularly – Larry, Jesse and Vaughn.[19] There are also a number of intonational features, and vocabulary items which differentiate the two major groups, and sub-groups within them. Such small tokens of group identification bear witness to the powerful group pressures exerted on language.

The social organization known as the Jets has persisted for many years with extraordinary stability, in spite of opposition from all of the other social groups

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[19] Larry and Jesse are brothers; a third brother is Peaches, a central figure among the younger members of the 100's block.

in the community. The adults in the Jet area consider them 'hoodlums'; the schools have suspended their leading members; the courts have sent several upstate; and the neighboring groups of their own age are even more hostile. What then explains the success of the Jets as a stable social institution?

First of all, it is clear that there are socio-economic factors, not analyzed here, which operate upon inner-city communities to produce similar patterns of social organization. Table 9 shows some of the social characteristics of the Jets and

TABLE 9. *Social characteristics of Jet and Cobra clubs*

	Cobras	Jets
Persons interviewed	19	36
Average age	14.1	14.2
Families on welfare	27%	11%
Mother and father living home	41%	40%
Father not living home	47%	50%
Average number of persons in hang-out list	7.5	6.6
Total different persons named	54	82
Average namings per person	2.5	3
only those interviewed	4.7	5.1
those not interviewed	1.5	1.1
Club members said to be suspended from school	0	2
Club members 'upstate' [in correctional institution]	9	3

Cobras. They are remarkably similar in family structure, in the average number of persons named in the hang-out group, and both show a record of conflicts with the law. These figures are similar to those for comparable vernacular groups in New York and other cities. The Jets provide a group answer to certain social needs which are not met by the surrounding society. Groups of Jets can take over empty apartments, commandeer rooftops to fly pigeons, steal clothes and other loose goods, and get high together. They also support each other's view of their individual worth through a system of shared attitudes.

The linguistic forms which differentiate the Jets from the surrounding adults and lames are symbolic representations of the value system which distinguishes the group and draws new members. Members can seldom make these values explicit; a quotation from Champ, a younger secondary member of the Jets, shows some of the difficulty in formulating covert values.

JOHN LEWIS: I want to ask you, man. How come you join the Jets? Do you know?

CHAMP: First reason I joined 'em, 'cause I like to fight; you know, gang fight, and the second reason I joined was while they – while we was 'round there and they have nothin' to do – play against fightin' each other. And the third reason I f – joined, 'cause I lived around the neighborhood.

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Champ's answer illustrates the Jet values of mutual support and gain of status in fighting, and the sense of belonging to a neighborhood. There are also gains in support against the perceived oppression of the surrounding society, the prestige of close association, and the inside knowledge proceeding from that association. A very verbal member of the Jets, Vaughn, gives us the clearest view of what the Jets can provide for someone who could follow the upward path of social mobility through education, but refuses. Vaughn moved into the area from Washington Heights the year before. He had demonstrated the ability to use the school culture for his personal advantage, but he deliberately selected the Jets' culture instead.

> VAUGHN: These men have taught me everything I know about all this bullshit, because I'm uptown, that like a different world an' shi-it. My mind was poisoned, y'know, when I moved down here niggers started, you know, hipping me to little things an' shi-it, so you know I figure I'm learning from it, so why *not*, y'unnerstan', why not?...
>
> JOHN LEWIS: Now dig...like, uh...well what sort of things have they taught you?
>
> VAUGHN: Eh well, they learned me about reefer an' shi-it. I'm not saying that tha's *good*...They hip me to the whitey's *bullshit*, they hip me to that. Now I don't, I'm not saying that *that's* good, either, y'unnerstan', but I'm just telling you what they *did* for me.

Thus we see that the inside knowledge proceeding from the association with the peer group is a major factor in supporting the group. For Vaughn, the covert values of the vernacular culture have become overt: he sees the Jets as a force directly opposed to the dominant white value system which claimed his allegiance but which he has rejected.

We have already seen that Vaughn is an integral member of the 'six best fighters', and has some superficial linguistic markers in common with Larry and Jessie H. But since Vaughn has come into the Jet orbit only in the past year, one would not expect him to have absorbed the whole range of grammatical and phonological patterns of the Jets. Vaughn implies that he was more or less a lame in Washington Heights and it is inevitable that his grammar will reflect this. Whereas other Jets show the usual 100 per cent negative concord within the clause, Vaughn is variable: he shows only 30 out of 35 cases of transfer of the negative to a following indefinite. He uses dummy *it* for *there* in only two out of seven cases. Whereas other Jets show 17 out of 18 or 21 out of 22 monomorphemic clusters simplified before a consonant (as in *just me*) Vaughn simplifies only 4 out of 17. We would therefore be justified in removing Vaughn's records from the mean values for the Jets, which would explain some of the slight irregularities noted in the tables above. Vaughn is able to give us an excellent and explicit statement of the value of belonging to the Jets; but his linguistic system cannot

adjust as quickly as his value system or his style of life. The remarkably consistent grammar of the Jets is the result of ten years of their continuous interaction with each other and with other groups in the BE vernacular system.

Adults and adolescents. If we see the adolescent primary group as the main agent in the social control of language, we then have to explain the great uniformity of the Black English vernacular throughout the major cities of the North and South and even in most rural areas. It has now been well-established that the grammar we are dealing with is essentially the same in New York, Detroit, Washington, Philadelphia, San Francisco and such uniformity may very well reflect the presence of a wide-spread Creole grammar used throughout the Southern United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet if the primary group can exert such influence on language, what prevents various sub-groups from drifting off in different directions? This is a question which cannot be settled in the light of our present knowledge. But it should be noted that it is not merely the grammar which is uniform. The vernacular culture itself is equally constant from one urban area to another; the grammar is just one of the many elements of the social pattern which is transmitted. This uniformity cannot be maintained by adolescents, since the great majority of the members who travel from one city to another are adults. We should therefore be hesitant in saying that the late teens are the upper limit for the consistent use of the Black English vernacular. It is true that the adults recorded in interviews with Clarence Robins have as a whole shifted away from the vernacular on all the variables that discriminate members and lames (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968). In their use of (r), (dh), and (ing), working-class adults resemble the lames rather than members. Negative concord is variable in adults and in lames, but obligatory for members. In consonant cluster simplification, adults show the grammatical constraint as more important than the phonological one, again resembling lames more than members. The most sensitive index of the Black English vernacular is the use of the deletion rule for *is*: working-class adults are at an even lower level than the lames, $\Phi = 0.21$ as against 0.60–0.70 for members and 0.36 for lames. We also find that adults show subject-verb agreement with third-singular -*s*; while this inflection is present only 00 to 40 per cent of the time among members, it is found from 70 to 100 per cent of the time among adults; furthermore, the adults show a phonological rule operating in that they show more -*s* before a following vowel, while members show the inflection *less* often in this context. Adults rarely use dummy *it* for *there*, seldom use *ain't* for *didn't*, and rarely use the invariant be_2.

But before we conclude that the entire adult population is 'lame', it must be remembered that we did not record adults in social interaction with their own friends and neighbors. Even in casual speech, adults fall short of the mark set by the group sessions with members; but the sections of casual speech which

we drew from the interview are less valid approximations to the vernacular than the group sessions of the Jets and Cobras. Instead of concluding that the basic grammar of adults has shifted we might say that adults have greater practice in shifting their use of the variables towards the standard in semi-formal contexts. *Until we have carried out long-term participant observation with adult groups, it is impossible to make any firm statements about adult grammars.* If we do finally conclude that adult grammars have shifted away from the vernacular, the problem of explaining the uniformity of the BE grammar throughout the country will become formidable. If adults are not the ultimate model upon which the vernacular is based, what would prevent the adolescent peer groups from gradually dispersing in a hundred different directions?

If we are to solve this problem, we will have to work with adult peer groups as we have worked with adolescents. When we have recorded young working-class adults in their most ordinary social setting, we will be able to say more definitely whether they still command the vernacular, and whether their resemblance to lames in our data is a matter of style or competence.

THE PREVALENCE OF LAMES

In the first four sections of this paper, we have seen that an accurate description of a language will demand some knowledge of the social structure of its users. We must be able to find our way through the various intersecting patterns of the normally heterogeneous society if we are to locate the most uniform and consistent forms of the grammar, since an understanding of variation requires a realistic assessment of the invariance that accompanies it. We have used the direct study of variation to establish this point, exploiting the relations of more or less which are expressed in variable rules. But the case is equally clear in the traditional framework of obligatory vs. optional rules: we cannot establish this basic distinction accurately without identifying the vernacular in its context – the primary social group.

We can now turn to examine more carefully the central theme of this analysis: The concept of the *lame*. What does it mean to be a lame? Though language is one of the most striking and salient emblems of lame status, there are many other consequences for behavior. These must be taken into account to evaluate and understand the data that the linguist draws from his informant, especially if that informant is the linguist himself.

The term *lame* carries the negative connotation that was originally intended by the members of the BE vernacular culture who applied it to the isolated individuals around them. But it is evident that the lames are *better* off than members in many ways. They are more open to the influence of the standard culture, and they can take advantage of the path of upward mobility through education, if they are so inclined or so driven (see Labov and Robins 1969). They

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are less open to social pressures to fight, to steal, or take drugs. Of course some lames steal, shoot up, and drop out; but as a group, they have a better record. In a study of thirty-seven addict and non-addict sibling pairs, Glaser *et al.* 1971 found that twenty-two of the addicts said that they had hung out in gangs as kids, and only seven of the non-addicts. In sixteen of the cases, it was agreed that the non-addict had stayed home most as a teenager, and in only seven was this said of the addict. There are any number of positive terms that I might have applied to lames which would reflect this side of the matter, contrasting them with the members of the lower-class peer groups: *non-delinquents* as against *delinquents*, *culture-free* as against *culture-bound*, *upwardly mobile* as against *downwardly mobile*. Even a neutral term such as *isolates* would have avoided the pejorative sense of *lame* which must inevitably irritate readers who realize that lames are better individuals from the stand-point of middle-class society – and even more importantly, that it is to the personal advantage of any individual to be a lame. Even if he does not go to college, he has a better chance of making money, staying out of jail and off of drugs, and raising children in an intact family. Given hindsight or a little foresight, who would not rather be a lame?

The term *lame* serves to remind us that it is the normal, intelligent, well-coordinated youth who is a member of the BE vernacular culture and who is suffering from the social and educational depression of the ghetto. The lames are exceptional in one way or another. Some unusually intelligent and some unusually stupid boys are lames; some lames are courageous and self-reliant individuals who go their own way with no need of group support, and some are weak or fearful types who are protected from the street culture by their mothers, their teachers, and their television set. Some lames gain safety or success through isolation, but in exchange they give up the satisfaction of a full social life, and any first-hand knowledge of the BE vernacular culture. Other lames have gained nothing through their isolation: they are the victims of a disorganized and demoralized sub-section of the community. Many descriptions of the poor and disadvantaged are explicitly about lame areas and lame children. The study by Pavenstedt *et al.* of deprived children in the North Point Project of Boston for example, was concerned with disorganized families exhibiting 'social and/or psychological pathology':

> They do not belong to a 'culture', having neither traditions nor institutions. No ethnic ties nor active religious affiliations hold them together. In fact we speak of them as a group only because of certain common patterns of family life and a form of peripheral social existence. (Pavenstedt 1967: 10).

The descriptions of the language of these children matches the picture of 'verbal deprivation' which we find in educational psychologists who have developed the 'deficit hypothesis' (Labov 1970, Plumer 1970). Many of the descriptions of the

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language behavior of lower-class Black children may be based on such specially selected populations.[20]

In other discussions of the vernacular we have indicated that the lames have suffered a loss of some magnitude in their isolation from the rich verbal culture of the BE vernacular.[21] The members themselves, who have responded to the definition of man as a social animal, see most clearly the overwhelming disadvantages of being a lame. For those who are trying to understand the structure and evolution of social behavior, the disadvantages of dealing with lames will eventually appear just as clearly. At first glance, lames appear to be members of the community; they are much more accessible to the outsider than members are; and the limitations of their knowledge are not immediately evident. But the result as we have seen may be an inaccurate or misleading account of the vernacular culture. Many of the informants used by linguists and anthropologists are lames – marginal men who are detached from their own society far enough to be interested and accessible to the language, the problems and preoccupations of the investigator.[22] It is even more common for the linguist to work with captive populations – classes of students who are tested as a whole without regard to their group membership or participation in the culture being studied. Subjects selected with the assistance of teachers, psychologists, or parents are even more heavily biased towards the lame population and unfortunately, the number of studies of Black English made in schools far outnumbers the studies done by direct contact with members in a vernacular context.[23] If the vernacular culture is the main stream of linguistic and social evolution as we have argued elsewhere

[20] Note that some such projects explicitly concentrate subjects with histories of psychological pathology, or work in areas with high concentrations of mental retardation. This was the case with the study of Heber, Dever and Conry in Milwaukee (1968) which was used by Jensen to argue that genetic limitations play a major role in the poor school performance of lower-class Blacks (1969).

[21] See Abrahams (1964), Labov 1973, and section 4.2 of Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968 for evidence that BE vernacular culture is the most verbal sub-culture within the United States. As a whole, the lames have lost out on this, although many have managed transfer their verbal skills into a superbly elaborated version of the Bernsteinian elaborated code.

[22] The classic case is the work of Loflin (1970) whose descriptions of the grammar of Black English are explicitly based on data obtained over a period of approximately one year from a 14-year-old boy. Data supplied by an isolated individual in response to direct questions may be skewed from the vernacular in the direction of the standard, as in the data given above. But if the informant understands that the linguist is interested primarily in those features which are most different from the standard he will produce a stereotyped version in the opposite direction. A comparison of Loflin's descriptions with the spontaneous group data collected at the Center by Loman (1967) shows that this kind of distortion is most common: as for example, reporting that there is no preterit *-ed* or *have +en* in the dialect.

[23] For school-based studies see Loban 1966, Henrie 1969, Entwistle and Greenberger 1969, Baratz 1968, Cazden 1965, Garvey and McFarlane 1968 and many others. For secular studies, see Wolfram 1969, Mitchell 1969, those cited in this study and not many others.

then this is a serious matter. Let us consider for a moment some of the ways in which lames fall short as informants.

We have already seen in section 2 that Lesley and the other 1390 Lames used a kind of Black English that was much closer to some of the other non-standard vernaculars than to BE. They show subject-verb agreement, variable negative concord, contraction of *is* but very little deletion, and so on. If we begin to explore broader aspects of the vernacular culture, the data are even more skewed. One of the most important regulations in peer group society are the rules for fair fighting, and the violations of those rules that make up street fighting. The information we can get from lames like Curtis is only hearsay. He has been in no major fights of his own, and his accounts of T-Bird fights are those of a bystander who never understands how they started. One of our basic questions in the 'Fight' section of our interview schedule is, 'What was the best fight you ever saw?' To get the same message across to lames, we have to translate this into 'What was the worst fight you ever saw?' A great many lames actually deny the fights they were in – partly because they lost, and partly because they have been trained to think of fighting as a bad thing to do. As a result, lame narratives of personal experience are lame, too.

If we are interested in toasts, jokes, sounds, the dozens, riffing, or capping, we cannot turn to the lames. They have heard sounding from a distance, but proficiency at these verbal skills is achieved only by daily practice and constant immersion in the flow of speech. Lames do not know 'Signifying Monkey', 'Shine', 'The Fall' or any of the other great toasts of the oral literature. But away from home, some lames look back on the vernacular culture and try to claim it as their own; the result can be a very confused report for the outsider who relies on such data.

Some Black professors and students condemn 'ghetto English' as an inferior means of communication; they claim that Black people can improve their social and economic position only if they acquire the formal means of expression used by the high culture of the University. Yet even these highly educated speakers show a divided mind on the place of the vernacular, usually referred to as 'our own language', 'home language' or 'soul language'. Most college students will claim to have a deep and intimate knowledge of it and insert into their basically standard grammar quotations from the 'language of the street'. It is only natural for others to turn to them as informants or even authorities on what can or cannot be said in that dialect.

But the findings presented here show that unless these speakers were raised within the majority peer group culture, their grammar will be peripheral to the Black English vernacular. They may be at a greater disadvantage than they realize in dealing with complex rules such as those involved in negative concord (Labov 1972) since their own grammars may be influenced by other dialects in a number of subtle and indirect ways. This is a serious problem, for it is hard

to imagine the study of the BE vernacular making good progress without Black linguists carrying the major share of the field work and analysis. Given our present social situations, most Black graduate students will be lames; but even with the limitations shown here, it should be clear that they are much closer to the Black vernacular than any white student will be. More importantly, they have the background and credentials to become as close as they want to. To do this it is only necessary that they achieve a firm understanding of what the vernacular is, who speaks it, and how they stand in relation to it.

The position of the Black graduate student in linguistics is no different from that of any linguist in his removal from the vernacular. If a Black student should take seriously Chomsky's claim that the primary data of linguistics are the intuitions of the theorist, and begin to write an introspective BEV grammar, the results would be bad – but no worse than other grammars now being written on the same basis. The problem we are dealing with here is one of the greatest generality, for it must be realized that most linguists are lames.

THE LINGUIST AS LAME

There are communities where the basic vernacular is a prestige dialect which is preserved without radical changes as the adolescent becomes an adult. The class dialect used in British public schools had that well-formed character, and presumably a British linguist raised as a speaker of Received Pronunciation can serve as an accurate informant on it.[24] There are middle-class French and Spanish children who may be in the same favorable position in relation to their prestige dialect. To a lesser extent, this may be said about a few Americans who grow up in upper middle-class communities where 90 per cent of the high school graduates go on to college. On the surface, they seem to continue using the dialect that was the main vehicle of communication by peer-groups in their pre-adolescent years, and be able to represent that group in speech as well as intuition.

The great majority of linguists are probably not in that position. They were already detached from the main peer group activity in early adolescence as they pursued their own interests, and by the time they enter graduate studies in linguistics are at some distance from the majority of vernacular speakers in their community.

Even if the linguist is raised in a community of peers, fully immersed in the main stream of social life in his high school years, he can be expected to broaden his horizon when he pursues college and graduate training; at the same time he

[24] The social controls exerted on that dialect are well known; deviations from the standard are penalized by members who are looking for linguistic evidence of an inadequate background (Wyld 1936). If it is true that Received Pronunciation cannot be mastered by someone who has been to the wrong school, this would stand as additional confirmation of the fact that the regular rules of the vernacular must be formed in the pre-adolescent years.

weakens his command of the vernacular. Our studies of sound change in progress in cities throughout England and America shows that college students are in general a very poor source of data. The sharp, clear patterns shown in the working-class speakers are blurred, limited, and mixed in the speech of the college student. The principle seems to hold that learning closely related dialect rules affects the form of the original ones. The linguist who is alert to the widest range of dialect differences, who may construct the broadest pan-dialectal grammar, is often the worst informant on his own local dialect. There are of course exceptions – some speakers show an extraordinarily tenacious hold on their original dialect. But we do not know who the exceptions are until we have studied the vernacular in the intact speech community itself.

It was once thought that linguistics could be entirely objective, like the study of height and weight. In the past two decades, it has become abundantly clear that the insight and understandings of the native speaker are indispensable to linguistic analysis, and it is therefore essential that the linguist recognize what speech community he himself is a member of. The normally heterogeneous community contains overlapping and inclusive sub-systems: many members of the larger community show good competence in a number of these. A lame may not achieve full competence in any one vernacular dialect, since he interacts as an individual with many other individuals and small groups rather than partici-pate fully in any primary group. There are obvious advantages to being a lame if your aim is to study a wide range of dialects and varieties of your own language. The linguist can make capital of his position as a marginal man, if he recognizes it as such. I was a lame myself in my adolescent years: my knowledge of the non-standard vernacular of the working-class majority in Fort Lee, New Jersey, is as indirect as the lames' knowledge of the BE vernacular. The knowledge I now have of vernacular cultures was developed in later contacts – in factories, in the service, and in field trips as a linguist. Entering a new group and a new culture is always easier if you understand and appreciate the initial distance: the linguist who fails to judge that distance accurately may fall painfully short or ridiculously long.

Many linguists feel that they can withdraw entirely from this effort, and take as their object of study the small community of their peers. If it were true that the massed society of linguists formed a vernacular speech community, this would be an excellent strategy. But a linguist's idiolect is often an accumulation of superposed varieties, like that of most college-educated speakers; and it is further compounded by the intuitions he has developed in the effort to prove or disprove a particular theory. The data cited in recent articles show nothing like the uniformity that we observe in core members of the vernacular peer groups: when push comes to shove, linguists disagree.

When we now hear linguists speaking at every hand about 'my dialect' and 'dialect variation' we are bound to wonder what basis they have for their claims.

The only data usually provided is that some other linguist has disagreed with their intuitive judgments of certain sentences, and it is therefore decided that the critic is speaking a different dialect. 'My dialect' turns out to be characterized by all the sentence types which have been objected to by others. These are lame dialects, which reflect the speaker's theory more than any linguistic or social reality.

It is difficult for us, caught up in current linguistic practice, to evaluate the overwhelming reliance of our field on the theorist's own intuitions as data. Scholars of the future who must eventually review and explain our behavior may find it hard to understand our casual acceptance of confused and questionable data, the proliferation of *ad hoc* dialects, and the abandonment of the search for intersubjective agreement. They may point out that most scholars will do whatever they have been told is right and proper by other scholars. But their analysis may also indicate that our current trend is supported by more than local ideology; a theoretical stance can become a congenial way of life. To refine the intricate structure of one's own thoughts, to ask oneself what one would say in an imaginary world where one's own dialect is the only reality, to dispute only with those few colleagues who share the greatest part of this private world – these academic pleasures will not easily be abandoned by those who were early detached from the secular life. The student of his own intuitions, producing both data and theory in a language abstracted from every social context, is the ultimate lame.

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