

ON ONE PECULIARITY OF THE VERB OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE U.S.A.

(with special reference to Black English)

G. S. ŠČUR and N. V. SVAVOLYA

Institute of Linguistics, The Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R.

The omission of *have* in the forms of Perfect is known to be one of the peculiar features of Modern English of the U.S.A. in colloquial speech, especially in its substandard variant. This phenomenon was observed by many scholars¹ but their interpretation of the resulting forms — *I been*, *I done*, *I seen* — differed greatly. As early as 1926 R. Menner (1926 : 238) marked that it was “not unlikely that *I seen* and *I done* when they first appeared in the vulgate were still perfect tenses with the auxiliary syncopated; that owing to the confusion of the two tenses in such cases as *I'(ve) never seen it*, and *I never saw it*, *I seen* came to be regarded as a real preterite and extended to all the functions of the past tense, as in *I seen it yesterday*”.

Due to the fact that the position of the Perfect Tense in the history of many languages was rather unstable, the distinction between preterite and perfect was alternately lost and reintroduced at various times. Modern spoken French, High German, Russian and some others may serve as an example of languages which ceased to distinguish between preterite and perfect. No wonder that in Modern American English (AE) the above-mentioned distinction is gradually beginning to be lost, which is evident from the appearance of forms with the omission of *have*. Once the forms *I been*, *I seen* were an outstanding feature of uneducated speech, but the history of some languages shows that phenomena earlier regarded as clearly nonstandard, later were absorbed into standard lexicon (Visser 1966 : 1298). Probably in future the above said forms will undergo the same process and be quite common in AE,

¹ Krapp (1925:258), Menner (1926:238), Fries (1940:67-70), Atwood (1953:41), Putnam and O'Hern (1955:1-29), Brown, Brown and Bailey (1958:196-8), Marekward (1958:149), Bryant (1962:72; 96), Mencken (1963:534-5), Reed (1967:38; 48-49), Labov (1971:473-499).

but now one can witness the first stages in the loss of the Perfect Tense. In many other languages no need is felt to distinguish between the Perfect and the Preterite and it remains to be seen whether a wholesale abandonment of the Perfect is under way in spoken AE. But taking into consideration the subdivision of AE into the so-called White and Black, we are to review first some standpoints concerning the above-mentioned phenomenon in both varieties of AE.

There have long been two directly opposed views as to the difference between Black English (Bl E) and other dialects of AE. M. Loflin (1971: 428), for instance, is of the opinion that "any one who attempts to describe the structure of the verb of Nonstandard Negro English (NNE) must account for several facts: to begin with, there is no perfective form, *have+en*, comparable to the one posited for Standard English (SE). In particular, there are no surface realizations in simple sentences, ordinary yes/no questions, nor in tag questions".

J. L. Dillard (1972) in his analysis of the peculiarities of Bl E as compared to SE marks among others such typical features of Bl E as the omission of *have* in the Perfect and the use of the auxiliary preverbal *done* instead of *have* in the Immediate Perfective, accounting for the above-said peculiarities by some African substratum, thus discovering affinity of Bl E to West African languages.

Other linguists touching upon this problem in AE either deny the fact that the omission of *have* is the domain of Bl E only, or give preference to it². However, it is worth special notice that the above-mentioned phenomenon is typical not only of Bl E but of AE (white speakers), British English (BE), Canadian English (CE), Australian English (AuE), English of Tristan da Cunha (ETdC), which are different territorial variants of Modern English³. Furthermore, the phenomenon under consideration and the omission of the auxiliary verb is characteristic of literary and spoken forms of some other Germanic languages — Swedish, Low and High German, and of some Slavonic languages⁴ as well.

The discussed omission of *have* in the Perfect forms can be probably accounted for by the typology of this phenomenon in the English language in general and in Bl E as a social dialect of English in particular. It should be mentioned, however, that unlike Swedish and German these forms in English are first of all peculiarity of colloquial speech while in the above-said

² Mc David (1966:72-83), Reed (1967:18-19), Bailey (1971:421-7), Mc David (1971: 468-72), Stewart (1971:454-67), Fasold and Wolfram (1972:53-86), Fasold (1972:1-5; 219).

³ Visser (1966:1298), Wright (1905:298), Menner (1926:238), Poutsma (1926:217), Mencken (1963:534-5), Myórs (1952:183), Barber (1964:136), Orkin (1971:61-3; 152-7), Turner (1966:24-37; 168-180), Zettersten (1969:85-6), Sčur (1974).

⁴ Magnusson (1939:21), Gricikat (1954:2-9; 63; 154-67), Johannisson (1960:40; 42), Sčur (1970), Dejanova (1970:129-209), Sčur (1975a).

languages they are present in the literary variety. Besides, the Perfect forms without the auxiliary verb in English can be found in both principal and subordinate clauses, which is not the case with other Germanic languages where this phenomenon is admitted only in latter ones. This discrepancy marks, on the one hand, different specific character of the omission of *have* in Perfect in individual Germanic languages, and, on the other hand, supposes a parallel development which hence has specific forms of realization in various languages. The tendency of the increasing usage of the Perfect forms with the omission of *have* alongside with the forms of the Future Tense without *shall* and *will* and forms of the synthetic Subjunctive I in colloquial speech in all territorial variants of English can be treated as one marking the development of common English colloquial speech norm as opposed to SE norm with the obligatory use of analytic forms (Sčur 1963 and 1975).

The discussed synthetic forms can be to some extent interpreted not only as a specific Germanic phenomenon taking into account the fact that the omission of the auxiliary verbs in Perfect is also observed in some Slavonic languages (Gricikat 1954; Dejanova 1970), first and foremost in colloquial speech and dialects which influenced the literary language and resulted in gradual development of synthetic forms in it.

Thus, there seems to exist no sufficient reason for treating Perfect forms with the omission of *have* as specific phenomenon of Bl E only; however, at present there are no necessary facts which might account for the origin of this phenomenon in English and the frequent use of these forms in Bl E in particular. The same holds true of another alleged peculiarity of Bl E — the use of the preverbal *done* as the auxiliary verb of the Perfect forms.

Some linguists⁵ consider that Bl E has more Perfect constructions than SE — naming them Simple Perfect (*I seen*), Pre-Recent, Completive or Remote Perfective Aspect (*I been seen*), and Recent or Immediate Perfective Aspect (*I done seen*), respectively. The persistence of these "ungrammatical" from the point of view of SE forms has been accounted for by the fact that American Negro dialects probably came from a creolized form of English, once spoken on American plantations by Negro slaves and seemingly related to creolized forms of English which are still spoken by Negroes in Jamaica and other parts of the Carribean. J. L. Dillard (1972) stresses that Bl E resembles West African languages grammatically in the Remote Perfective form with the auxiliary *been*, and in the Immediate Perfective Aspect with the auxiliary *done*.

One of the most interesting facts about *done* is its occurrence in other pidgin- and creole-related languages. Parallel forms with *fèk* (French creole from *faire*) and *kaba* (Portuguese from *acabar*) occur in such languages even

⁵ Stewart (1964:10-18), Fickett (1972:17-19), Fasold and Wolfram (1972:53-86), Dillard (1972:47-8).

though their vocabulary base is not English. J. L. Dillard is of the opinion that it is quite probable that *kaba* was brought to the continent by slaves, although there appears to be no record of it. Nevertheless, he considers that the Southern use of *done* (both Negro and White dialects) in constructions *He done gone*, *He done went*, or *He done go* traces to the pidgin/creole source and is a natural kind of relexification of Pidgin Portuguese. Denying the attempts to explain the forms with *done* by the influence of some Old British regional dialects, for example Scottish, J. L. Dillard writes (1972 : 220) that "the recent perfective function which the American and African varieties have is not at all like the older British usage and makes sense only in the pidgin/creole tradition".

It is worth mentioning that unlike W. Stewart (1964), who regards the forms with the omission of *have* in BI E — *I been*, *I seen* — as Simple Perfect, J. L. Dillard does not treat them in any way. He considers that BI E speakers sporadically use *have/has* auxiliaries, but their lack of skill in using and manipulating them shows that *have/has* are really borrowings from SE and not an inherent feature of BI E itself. But the forms *been* and *done* come closest to the perfective function of *have* in SE although the correspondence is not complete.

As far as the form *done* is concerned, J. L. Dillard's statement (1972 : 221) that "the only historical problem would be to determine when *done* replaced *kaba*" does not seem valid, because this peculiarity is not a specific feature characteristic of BI E only, but is also found in some other territorial varieties of the English language, in particular in the English of Tristan da Cunha (Zettersten 1969; Sčur 1974) where there have never been either the representatives of BI E or the direct or indirect contacts with them. The analysis of this phenomenon in English seems to be very important because in this case it cannot be explained by the influence of other languages or, moreover, some African substratum, as will be shown later on. Furthermore, here the question arises how such BI E grammatical forms that are similar in both Creole language and earlier British dialects can be treated. There are two possible ways — either they developed through the stage of the decreolization process or were reinforced by some English dialectal forms that already in the 18th century were nonstandard or gradually became so and later on even dropped out of use altogether in White dialects (Traugott 1972: 187-194).

Taking into account bilateral influence of White and Black dialects, linguistic conditions among white settlers, distribution of white and black population and some other factors, it is quite evident that forms *I done*, *I seen* are not necessarily of creole origin. They resemble Northern English and Scottish forms, and this is hardly surprising because Ulster-Scots constituted an important part of the American colonial population after their immigration to the United States in 1720's. They settled in the South as farmers and then,

with the growth of the plantations, some became overseers. There exists a historical evidence of the close contacts between Scots and Blacks. The *History of Hopewell Presbyterian Church* of the northern part of South Carolina relates that nearly one-fourth of the congregation was Negro, and says, "They learned the manners and customs of the Scotch-Irish, and were able to imitate them with great perfection" (Lathan 1879:36).

It is only natural that the Negro slaves would have spoken primarily with their overseers and modelled their speech up to the Scotch-Irish patterns, where the above-mentioned Perfect constructions with *done* were commonly used in the 18th century and still survived at present.

The OED cites the construction *have+done+verb* in Scottish dialects from the 16th century: "As I efore haue done discuss", "And many other false abusion the Paip hes done invent"^a, which makes J. L. Dillard's statement about borrowing the preverbal *done* in constructions *I done gone* somewhat disputable.

The parallel forms in Creole languages are: *Him finish done* (He has quite finished), and, a partial alternate, though with less emphasis on the completion: *Him done finish* (He has already finished) (Traugott 1972: 187-194), while in BI E this construction would be *He done finished*, *He done gone* and similar phrases, which correlate with those of Northern English and Scottish dialects probably due to their influence on BI E, but not as the result of the relexification of *kaba*. Besides, if one considers the further development of BI E alongside with other territorial variants of the English language which were by some reason isolated from the language of the British Isles, one can notice that each of these variants either have lost or introduced several features which are not observable in the English language of Great Britain at present. For example, the presence of perfect constructions with *done* in the English of Tristan da Cunha — *When you done went down South ...*, *Edwin's done drawn his stone* (Zettersten 1969:131) — can be probably accounted for by the fact that among the first settlers there were Scotsmen and Englishmen, and then, due to the geographical isolation and absence of contacts with other dialects, the English of Tristan da Cunha has preserved some typical features of the language spoken in Britain at the beginning of the 19th century, the perfect forms with *done* being one of them.

Later on different intra- and extralinguistic factors influenced the distribution of the language features of Britain in various territorial and social variants of English. Some of them became common for a number of territorial varieties — the preference of forms with *will* in the Future Tense and with *should* in the Subjunctive in AE, AuE and SE; others were developed

^a *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933: 565): Lander Tractate 340 (1556); Scot. Poems. 16th c. II, 189 (1578).

individually, which is the case with Bl E, where besides the preverbal *done* one can find perfect forms with the auxiliary *been*, the latter being one of the peculiarities of Bl E verb-system and is not observed in other territorial and social variants of English: "Done" is a Virginia shiboleth, quite distinct from the "been" which replaces it in South Carolina. Yet one of their best choruses, without any fixed words, was "De bell done ringing", for which, in proper South Carolina dialect, would have been substituted, "De bell been a-ring" (Higginson 1870: 191 - 192).

Judging by the above-mentioned facts, M. Loflin's (1971) statement about the absence of Perfect in Bl E does not prove its validity. Probably due to the unstable position of *have* in Bl E and perfect forms with the omission of this auxiliary verb — *I seen, I been, I taken*, that made the distinction between Preterite and Perfect rather difficult, in Bl E there appeared new auxiliaries — *done and been*. Their function comes closest to the perfective function of *have* in SE, although, of course, the correspondence is not complete.

Nevertheless, we have every ground to say that the Perfect as a category does exist in Bl E but with specific forms of realization — the auxiliary verbs *done and been*. Moreover, maybe in future other territorial and social variants of English will undergo similar process because last decades are marked by the increase of forms with the omission of *have*, especially in AE, which in this case can be treated not as an entirely new phenomenon, typical of AE and influencing other variants of English, but rather as a revival of the older British usage, which is now returning to motherland where it had first originated. "Even *I seen*, though it is traced to 1440 by the OED, and had a prototype in *sehen* nearly two centuries earlier, begins to take on a distinctively American color. It apparently did not gain its present wide vogue among the American underprivileged until the high tide of Irish immigration in the 1840. Witherspoon in 1781 denounced *I seed* and *I see* as preterites, but not *I seen*, and Pickering, in 1815, and other early nineteenth century writers were content to echo Witherspoon. Wright ignores *I seen* in the *English dialect grammar*, though including *I see* and *I seed*, and in the *English dialect dictionary* makes *I seen* chiefly Irish. (The current *English dialect survey*, under Harold Orton of Leeds, shows that *I seen* is common, though hardly dominant, in the English West Midlands and elsewhere is only sporadic)" (Mencken 1963: 534 - 5).

Thus, the typology of perfect forms with the omission of *have* in different territorial and social variants of English can be probably accounted for by their common origin, and in other Germanic and Slavonic languages — by some other intra- and extralinguistic factors. As far as the possible hypothesis of economy of effort in the explanation of the omission of *have* in perfect forms is concerned, it does not seem acceptable, especially taking into account the fact that the above-said forms are typical of literary, but not

spoken variety of Low German and Swedish (Johannisson 1960), notwithstanding the presence of all necessary conditions for the latter case.

The reversed situation with the occurrence of these forms in spoken English cannot serve as an example either, in so far as from this point of view some languages and peoples should be considered less, and others — more inclined to economy of effort. The extra- and intralinguistic factors which stipulate for the origin and functioning of the perfect forms with the omission of *have* in different languages should be further investigated.

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