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When I started to using BLUR: Accounting for unusual verb complementation patterns in an electronic corpus of Earlier African American English

This paper introduces BLUR, the electronic corpus of Blues Lyrics compiled at the University of Regensburg, a new resource in corpus linguistics and in the investigation of the history of African American English, and it uses this corpus for an investigation of a specific syntactic problem documented in this corpus.

The first part of the paper presents and discusses the BLUR corpus (Miethaner 2004). BLUR consists of Blues lyrics, largely transcripts of field and studio recordings from the early period of the recording history of the Blues, beginning in the 1920s. The electronic corpus itself is accompanied by a relational database that makes the texts accessible by singers, states, recording years, and other features. BLUR consists of about 6500 song texts, and about 1.6 mio. words — a size which compares favorably with other existing corpora of nonstandard English. The main intention in the compilation of this corpus was to provide further evidence on an underdocumented historical phase of African American English, given that some researchers have suggested that divergence between black and white dialects set in early in the twentieth century.

The second section documents and analyses a couple of unusual verb complementation patterns which can be found in BLUR. Some of these can be accounted for by looking into the history of English and other electronic corpora, like the *for to* + infinitive pattern expressing purpose of intention (*I stopped **for to** rest my head; baby, you must want me **for to** be your low-down dog*; all examples from BLUR). Others indicate a certain degree of relatedness with present-day white dialects, like *get/go* + *to* with an incipient meaning (*when I **get to** walking; When your left eye **go to** jumping*), a characteristic feature of modern Southern English believed to be a 20th-century innovation. But others, again, are simply puzzling, being essentially absent from both present-day standard English and modern dialects, including AAVE. For example, in a fairly large number of instances bare infinitives are used in BLUR where *to*-infinitives would be expected (*you try **touch** it; I start **write** a letter*). In other cases, a verbal *-ing* form complements *to*, which may be understood as an infinitive marker or as a preposition (*He **started to dancing; He **begin to** thinking about his people***) — a pattern which has hardly ever been documented and has not been accounted for historically. It appears that these constructions largely depend upon a limited set of matrix verbs, including *begin, start, commence, mean, try*, and others. The paper provides a systematic description of these patterns in BLUR and explores writings on historical syntax as well as other historical corpora to investigate and explain the origin and nature of these constructions.

References

Miethaner, Ulrich. 2004. The BLUR (Blues Lyrics Collected at the University of Regensburg) Corpus: Compilation and Analysis. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Regensburg.