Black English in Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*
O 'Black English' em *American Splendor*, de Harvey Pekar

Fábio Augusto Ludwig

Gustavo Arthur Matte

Resumo: Este artigo é uma tentativa de demonstrar de que maneira Harvey Pekar utiliza a variedade linguística conhecida por 'Black English' para caracterizar as personagens negras de suas histórias publicadas na revista 'American Splendor'. Isto será feito através da análise de três números da série, que não tem tradução para o português. O referencial teórico utilizado é o livro "Tense marking in Black English", de Ralph W. Fasold, que fornece algumas noções a respeito do comportamento do 'Black English', tanto socialmente quanto linguisticamente. O objetivo é identificar se existe correspondência entre a maneira de falar das personagens negras da revista e a definição de 'Black English' estabelecida por Fasold no livro "Tense marking in Black English". Após a análise, fica evidenciado que o 'Black English' de Harvey Pekar apresenta pouca semelhança com o 'Black English' descrito por Fasold..O motivo para essa diferença pode ser explicado pelo contraste entre a abordagem científica de Fasold e a perspectiva do convívio cotidiano presente na obra de Pekar.
Palavras-chave: Black English; American Splendor; Harvey Pekar; histórias em quadrinhos.

Abstract: this article is an attempt to demonstrate how the author Harvey Pekar, in his comic book called 'American Splendor', uses the linguistic variety known as Black English to feature the characters of his stories. This will be done through the analysis of three comic books of the series, which has no translation to Portuguese. The theoretical background used is the book "Tense marking in Black English," by Ralph W. Fasold, which gives some notions about the behavior of Black English, both linguistically and socially. The objective is to identify if there is a correspondence between the way the black characters of the comic book speak and the definition of Black English given by Fasold in his book "Tense marking in Black English." The analysis shows us that Harvey Pekar's Black English does not fit in Fasold's description. The main reason for this difference can be explained by the contrast between Fasold's approach, which is scientific, and that of Pekar, which is based on the daily contact with Black English.
Key-words: Black English; American Splendor; Harvey Pekar; comic books.

1. Introduction

American Splendor is an adult American comic book series of the 1970's whose author is a grumpy Jewish man called Harvey Pekar. He was born in 1939 in Cleveland, Ohio, the city

where he grew up and lived until his death, in 2010. Throughout his life, Harvey Pekar tried to portray the world (and his world was Cleveland) using the comic books language, which mixes images and words. The result is a rather realistic style that shows a very pessimist and monotonous point of view about life – as if life were a dull routine where there is little space for adventure or romance.

In the universe of his comic books, the city of Cleveland is a very important element. In *American Splendor*, Cleveland is the background of every story – its skyscrapers, its parks, its summers and winters. However, more than being just the scenario of the stories – a mere landscape – in *American Splendor,* Cleveland acts like a character, being a place whose historicity and culture interfere deeply in the people's behavior. *American Splendor* is not just a comic book about daily life. It is also a comic book about Cleveland: Pekar tries to go deeply inside the very heart of the city; he tries to make, of course, a portrait of life – but not simply generic life: it is the life in Cleveland.

According to Wikipedia, Cleveland is located on the Northeast U.S., on the Southern banks of lake Erie. It was founded in 1796, and became a manufacturing center because of its privileged location near to numerous canals and railroad lines. After the American civil war (1861 – 1865), the black people from the South started to go to the North in search of places where they could work in the factories. During this demographic movement, Cleveland received many black people – for Cleveland was an industrialized city in need of workforce. Nowadays, the black community represents the largest fraction of the population of the city.

According to the census, in 2000, black people corresponded to 52.2% of the population of Cleveland, while the white population was around 42% and the Hispanic population was around 7%. In the 1970's, when Harvey Pekar started writing *American Splendor*, the number of black people in Cleveland was a little lower than the number of white people, but the number of black people was already significant. *Black English* is then one of the most important English varieties spoken in Cleveland. Today, it corresponds to the variety spoken by more than a half of the population of the city.

To address these issues, our research questions are: did Harvey Pekar notice the importance of *Black English* to Cleveland? How does he characterize – linguistically speaking – the black characters of his stories? Do they use the standard variety, or do they use their own variety, *Black English?* And finally, if Harvey Pekar tried to characterize his black characters using *Black English*, how did he do that? Does he have the same notion of Black English as Fasold?

2. Theoretical Background

Our research will be carried out using the definition of *Black English* given by Fasold (1972) in his book called "Tense marking in *Black English*." According to the author, "*Black English* is defined largely on the basis of its syntactic and phonological structure rather than on the basis of lexicon (Fasold, p. 03)." In the syntactic area, some features that distinguish *Black English* from other English varieties are: the use of distributive <u>be</u>, the remote time construction with <u>been</u> and the deletion of <u>is</u>:

> [...] the great bulk of the grammar and phonology of the dialect is shared with the varieties of American English spoken in other communities. At most points there is no real contrast between the dialect we call Black English and the standard dialects of American English; in fact, even the nonstandard features of Black English (such as multiple negation, the pleonastic pronoun [..]) are largely shared with other nonstandard dialects. But a few features, such as the use of distributive <u>be,</u> the remote time construction with <u>been</u>, and the deletion of <u>is</u>, are extremely rare or nonexistent in other dialects of American English, at least in the urban North. (Fasold, p. 2)

The reason he gives to the fact that the basis of lexicon is not important to define *Black English* is that even if there are some ethnic terms which are originated in the black community, "they are neither a necessary nor sufficient part of the definition of the dialect (p. 3):"

> The ethnic terms generally follow a fairly rapid cyclical pattern in which they arise in the black community, are adopted by "hip" young whites, then by establishment liberals, and finally pass into fairly general use. [...] At this point these terms are abandoned by the black community and others take their place. Ethnic terminology, then, is much too unstable to serve as a definitive criterion for Black English. The rules of grammar and pronunciation, by contrast, stay fairly constant for decades or longer. (Fasold, p. 3)

Therefore, our analysis in this paper will be focused on the perception of the syntactic structures of the *Black English* portrayed in Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*. We will give special attention to the elements which are the core of the analysis made by Fasold (1972). These elements are:

> [...] the absence of the concord suffix marking present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular (<u>He miss the bus every day</u>), the absence of the –<u>ed</u> suffix marking past tense and past participles (<u>He miss it yesterday</u>), and the fairly frequent absence of the tense-marked forms of <u>to be</u> (<u>He always be missing it</u>). (Fasold, p. 1)

3. Methodology

The analysis will be carried out in three numbers of the series called *American Splendor*, by Harvey Pekar. *American Splendor* number 01 was published in 1976, and it has eight stories – some of them with black characters and others without; *American Splendor #10* was published in 1985, and it has 12 stories – just one of them has black characters; and *American Splendor #17*, which was published in 1993, has fifteen stories. This study consists in investigating these stories in an attempt to find elements of black people's speech which characterize *Black English* as defined by Ralph W. Fasold. Then, a comparative analysis will be made between the *Black English* in *American Splendor* and the *Black English* in "Tense marking in Black English." The examples will be attached and discussed in this paper in the section called "Discussion." The main objective is to see if there is any correspondence between the two approaches on the subject.

As stated above, the discussion will be made based on three prior points. They are: (1) the absence of the concord suffix marking present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular; (2) the absence of the –ed suffix marking past tense and past participles; and (3) the fairly frequent absence of the tense-marked forms of to be. There will be a color for each of these points, representing them in the markings. Number (1) is represented in blue; number (2) is represented in green; and number (3) is represented by the color red.

4. Discussion

Let us now see how Harvey Pekar deals with Black English when constructing a black character. The following sample was extracted from the story called "101 ways to pick up girls":

Try it guys. It's magic !!!

In the six pictures of this story, there is no correspondence between the Black English that the characters are using and the Black English as defined by Fasold. In the aspect number (3) (the absence of the tense-marked form of to be), for example, we can see that the verb to be is always conjugated, except for the last picture, where it is absent in the black woman's speech; about number (2) (absence of the –ed suffix), there is nothing to say, for there is no use of past tenses in this story; and number (1) (absence of the concord suffix marking present tense) brings an interesting situation: in the last picture, the concord suffix -s is not absent, but the sentence is not according to the standard rule (the suffix -s is only used when the subject of the sentence is third person singular, and in this case it is the second person).

Let us analyze the second sample:
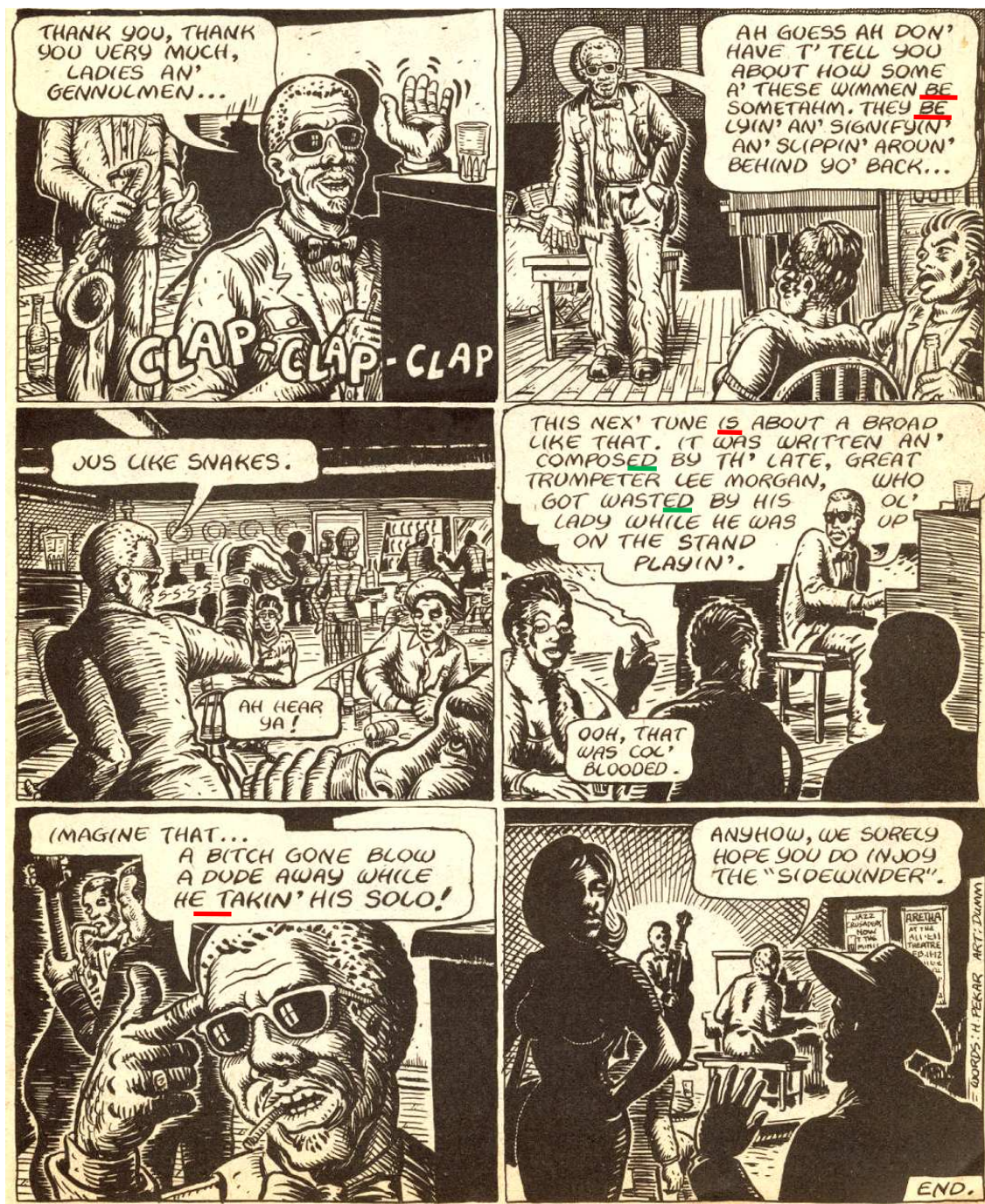
In the six pictures of this story (which is called "a new song is introduced in Cleveland"), there are a few interesting things that we want to highlight: in the second picture, the black musician does not conjugate the verb to be. This phenomenon is one of those described by Fasold (1972) (which is being called by aspect number (3) in this paper (the absence of the tense-marked form of to be)). It is also interesting to notice that in the fifth picture, the verb to be is lacking ("while he is taking his solo"); Harvey Pekar does not seem to have realized aspect number (2) (absence of the –ed suffix) in the speech of the black people, because in the fourth picture he wrote two words finishing with –ed (something that, according

to Fasold, is normally absent in Black English); there are no occurrences referring to aspect number (1) (absence of the concord suffix marking present tense).

The following excerpts were taken from the story called "love story". Let us analyze them:

In the third picture, the black woman uses the –s in the verb "to look," but the subject is not third person singular – it is third person plural. Therefore, there is a disagreement with the standard rule in aspect number (1) (absence of the concord suffix marking present tense), but it is different from that fixed by Fasold, who says that normally there is "absence of the concord suffix marking present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular;" in the first picture, the verb to be is conjugated ("that is")(aspect number (3), the absence of the tense-marked form of to be); it is interesting to notice that in this picture (the first one) there is a mistake (according to the standard rule) on the conjugation of the verb to be ("they was" instead of "they were"). In the second picture, the white guy conjugates the verb properly ("they were"), which shows that, for the author, there is a difference between the way that the white people use the verb to be and the way that the black people use it. But this difference is not the same

difference pointed by Fasold, for whom in Black English there is a "fairly frequent absence of the tense-marked forms of to be." (p. 1)
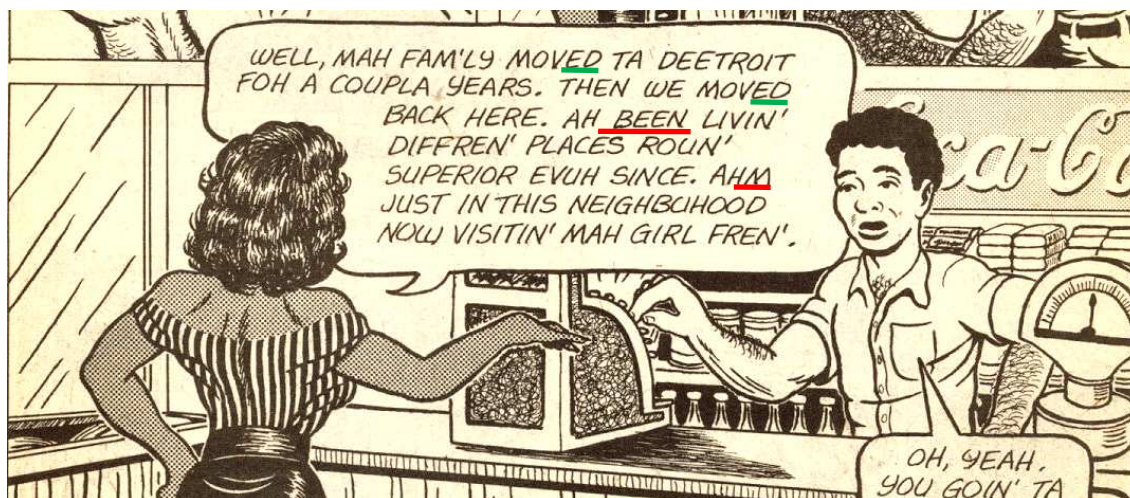
Again there is no correspondence between the way that Pekar portrays Black English and the way that Fasold has defined it. The two verbs in the past appear with –ed (2) (absence of the –ed suffix), and the verb to be is always conjugated (3) (the absence of the tense-marked form of to be) – however, the auxiliary verb "to have" is missing in "I have been living" ("I been living").
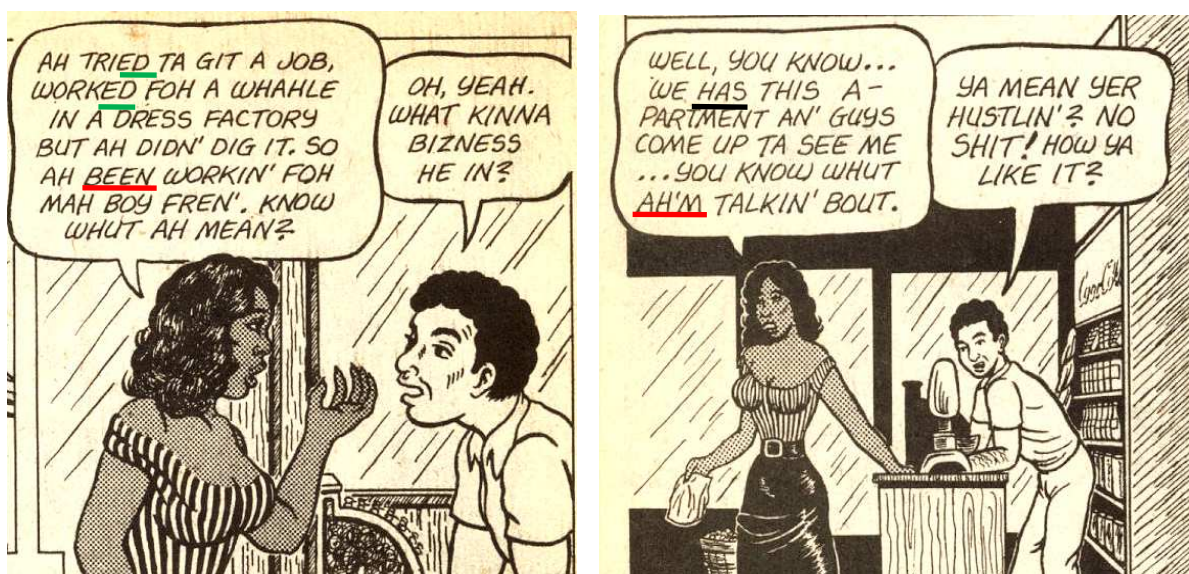
Again the verbs in the past are conjugated with –ed, unlike what was pointed by Fasold, who says that Black English normally presents an "absence of the –ed suffix marking past tense and past participles" (2); the verb to be is always conjugated, and the auxiliary verb "to have" is missing on the first picture ("I been working" / "I have been working") (3) (the absence of the tense-marked form of to be). Another interesting aspect is the concordance of the verb "to have" on the second picture: according to the standard rule, the verb "to have" turns into "has" when associated with the third person singular – but, in this case, the person is second plural.

The following excerpt was extracted from the story called "Revenge of the Nerds," which was published *in American Splendor* number 10.

An interesting phenomena which we have observed during our analysis is that in the numbers which followed *American Splendor #1* there is a significant reduction of the presence of black characters in the stories. Thus, there is not much material that can be used from *American Splendor* numbers 10 and 17. However, they are still important to this study. In the pictures above, for example, a dialogue between two blacks is represented. None of them is using a language similar to that described by Fasold, and therefore we can say that they are not speaking *Black English* (at least Fasold's *Black English*). Maybe this can be explained by the fact that they are at work, which is usually a more formal ambient. In situations like this, people tend to use the standard variety.

Let us now see some examples from *American Splendor #17*. The next example was extracted from the story called "Time:"

Again, this is a formal situation (they are at work). Each sentence of the black character is in accordance with the standard rule. The verb to be (case number (3), the absence of the tense-marked form of to be) is marked whenever it appears. What is interesting to notice here is

the speech of the white character. He uses a construction (marked with the color black) which Fasold describes as being characteristic of the *Black English* (case number (1): the absence of the concord suffix marking present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular).

Also from *American Splendor #17* is the story called "Mr. Boats on Longevity:"
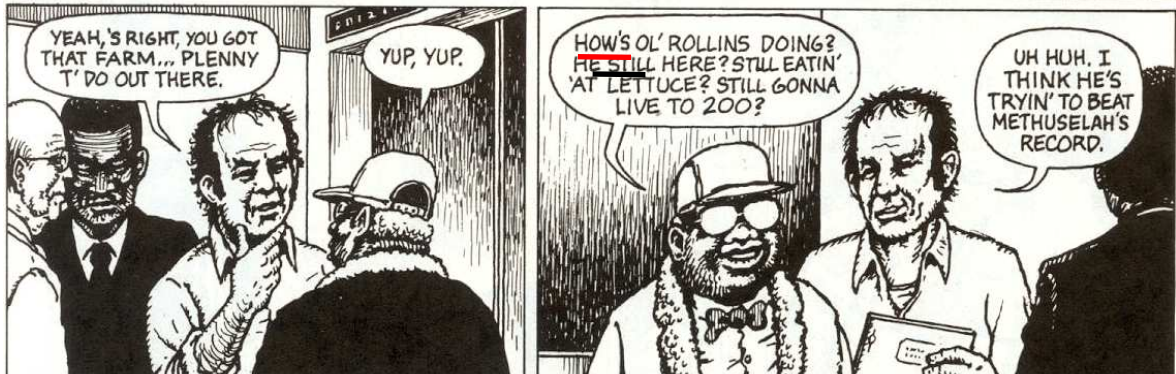
Despite the fact that the sentences of Mr. Boats are not in the standard rule, they are also not according to what Fasold describes as Black English. There is no (1) absence of the concord suffix marking present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular; nor (2) absence of the –ed suffix marking past tense and past participles; neither (3) absence of the tense-marked forms of to be.

Let us now analyze another example from "Mr. Boats on Longevity:"

In this excerpt we can see two different approaches on aspect number (3) (the absence of the tense-marked form of to be). If on the one hand the verb to be is marked in the first box (as shown underlined in red), on the other hand in the last box it is not (See wut'e gone say den!

– See what he <u>is</u> going to say then!). Something that can be noticed is that the author depicts the two characters differently. At the risk of doing some misjudging over the characters, we could say that one (the first) is well dressed and is using the elevator of what seems to be a commercial building, which lead us to think that he is well succeeded in life (in terms of money). The other character is a janitor. This raises the question of whether Harvey Pekar was aware of the different usages of language by members of different social classes or not. What seems to be the case is that the absence of tense marked <u>to be</u> happens more specifically in the usage of English by blacks from lower classes. However, this can be a tricky justification: the first character uses the third person without the concord suffix in the verb <u>do</u> (as underlined in blue – it don't matter/ it doesn't matter) (1) (the absence of the concord suffix marking present tense). Was he just using an informal way of speaking (as any character of the comic is generally depicted) or was he influenced by *Black English*?

5. Conclusion

In case number (1), there are only three occurrences that loosely reflect the understanding of Fasold about present tense marking in Black English. On two of those occurrences the suffix <u>–s</u> (which is used to mark the present tense in the third person in the standard variety) is present, and not omitted as Fasold proposed to be, but on the second person singular and third person plural. Thus, we cannot say whether these cases correspond or go against what Fasold proposed. However, there is an example in the story "Mr. Boats on Longevity" (*American Splendor #17*) which shows exactly the same phenomenon described by Fasold: the absence of the concord suffix marking present tense <u>when the subject of the sentence is third person singular</u>.

In case number (2), every occurrence of past tense present in the material was properly suffixed with <u>–ed</u>. Just when the past tense needed to be marked with the auxiliary verb "to be" there were some occurrences of what Fasold described in his book, and that is where we can say that Pekar and Fasold agreed in part. Although it did not happen in every case, the omission of tense marked verb "to be" happened occasionally. The only question raised is if this "occasionally" corresponds to the "fairly frequent" rate that Fasold said this omission happens.

Considering all this, we can say that Pekar depicts Black English differently from that of Fasold research. However, Pekar does point differences between the way black people and white people speak, as seen on some examples. So, for him, there is a typically black dialect. As a matter of fact, the characterizations that he gives to the way blacks speak distinguish from that of whites both in lexical and syntactical level. But the syntactical differences are not entirely correspondent to those that Fasold has described in his book.

Maybe the differences of approach between Pekar and Fasold came from the fact that one studied the issue from a scientific perspective (that of linguistics) and the other analyzed it from the daily contact with blacks from Cleveland. Those are two very distinctive approaches, and they deserve further consideration in other studies on this subject.

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