

# HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON A-PREFIXING IN THE ENGLISH OF APPALACHIA

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**ABSTRACT:** This article both expands and confirms research on a relic grammatical feature, the prefix *a-* on present participles. Because previous work has concentrated on its occurrence in the English of Appalachia and only synchronically, first its superregional distribution is shown. The article then surveys its evolution from a preposition (*on* or *at*) + gerund in Early Middle English to the prefix *a-* + participle. The article assesses possible transatlantic sources, arguing that southern England to be most plausible. Previous work, especially Wolfram (1980, 1988) in West Virginia and Feagin (1979) in Alabama, have identified both grammatical and phonological constraints on its occurrence and possible semantic or discourse meaning, for the prefix. These are tested against a large corpus from an area intermediate between the two, the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. Four major quantitative constraints prohibiting the prefix, originally proposed by Wolfram, are strongly substantiated, but a small number of exceptions to each argues that they are not categorical. With respect to other, more minor patterns, the prefix in the Smoky Mountains has a different distributed from West Virginia, but overall Wolfram's pioneering work is corroborated. Documenting and tracking these linguistic constraints through the history of English remain tasks for future corpus linguists.

**A** WELL-KNOWN FEATURE of regional American speech, often associated with the English of Appalachia, is the syllable *a-* prefixed to verb present participles, as in (1) and (2):

1. Wilford was kind of sick his last years *A-TEACHING*. [Corpus of Smoky Mountain English (CSME), F73, 1980]<sup>1</sup>
2. I ain't *A-WANTING* to bother nobody. [CSME, M50, 1939]

The prefix has hardly been a mere relic feature found only in the English of Appalachia, however. Atwood (1953, 35) reported that more than half the speakers interviewed in the 1930s and 1940s by the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (stretching from upper New York State to northeastern Florida) used the form at least once, especially in West Virginia (the only state entirely within Appalachia). Pederson et al. (1990, 149) document that 40% of the 914 primary informants for the Linguistic Atlas of the

Gulf States (LAGS), interviewed mainly in the 1970s, also used it at least once, the highest rate (56%) being in East Tennessee, the one LAGS sector lying entirely within Appalachia. Not far behind, however, were the LAGS sectors of Arkansas (50%) and northern/western Louisiana (52%); it was found in all 16 LAGS sectors, from Florida to East Texas. The currency in Appalachia indicated by atlas studies (at least for older-fashioned speakers) is confirmed by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE* 1985, s.v. *a prep*<sup>1</sup>), based on a nationwide program of recording and extensive canvassing of published literature and a wide range of other material. *DARE* characterizes the feature as “throughout U[nited] S[tates], but esp[ecially] freq[uent] in Midl[and], S[outh]w[est]; less freq[uent] S[ou]th, N[ew] Eng[land]” (*DARE* 1985, 1), finding it foremost in the Midland (a region whose borders roughly correspond to those of Appalachia in the East, but extend well into the Midwest and beyond the Mississippi River)<sup>2</sup> and in the Southwest, which received a significant infusion of English-speaking settlers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century from Appalachia and the South Midland.

Rather remarkably, the historical development of *a*-prefixing has received almost no attention except for its etymological sources, so a brief, however inadequate, sketch of this may throw light on issues that have to date been investigated only synchronically. Although its origin is somewhat more complex, the prefix developed from the erosion of the original preposition *an/on* (and sometimes from *æt/at*) in Early Middle English, attested as *a* in a variety of syntactic patterns and dated as early as the thirteenth century (see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [OED2], s.v. *a prep*<sup>1</sup> 13a, 13b; *OED Online* [Mar. 2009], s.v. *a prep*<sup>1</sup> 11a–d, 12). The alternation is still observable in such equivalent forms as *afire* versus *on fire* and *aboard* versus *on board*, as well as *a-Sunday* versus *on Sunday* and *a-horseback* versus *on horseback* in regional, including Appalachian, speech (see 19a and 21b below and *DARE* s.v. *a prep*<sup>1</sup> 2, 3). If, as according to Bybee and Dahl (1989) and Mittendorf and Poppe (2000), the progressive in English arose, following a universal linguistic tendency, from locative prepositional phrases, it was the erosion of prepositional *on* before gerundives with the *-ing* suffix in such phrases that led to *a*-prefixing on participles. Progressives ending in *-ing* were prevalent by Chaucer’s time.

That gerundives evolved into present participles is only part of the story, but this connection is an important one. Forms ending in *-ing* and having the prefix but maintaining such nominal features as a following prepositional phrase only very gradually disappear from the historical record of English; they are common in the Early Modern period and can be documented in the English of Appalachia as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as we will see. In such “intermediate” forms that exhibit both participial and

gerundive qualities, if not elsewhere, one might justifiably ask whether the *a* represents a preposition or a prefix.

Variation between prepositional *on* and *a* in adverbial constructions where normally no preposition is used today occurred in the Early Modern period, seen in (3)–(7). Shakespeare’s writing alone contains 34 instances of *a*, before 30 different verbs.<sup>3</sup>

3. hee set before his eyes king Henrie the eight with all his Lordes ON HUNTING in his Forrest at Windsore. [Thomas Nashe, *Unfortunate Traveller*, 1594; cited in Traugott 1972, 143]
4. I do invite you to-morrow morning to my house to breakfast: after, we’ll A-BIRDING together. I have a fine hawk for the bush. [William Shakespeare, *Merry Wives of Windsor* 3.3.206, 1602]
5. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go A FISHING. [John 21:3, King James Version of the Bible, 1611]
6. And as he was yet A COMING, the devil threw him down, and tare him. [Luke 3:42, King James Version of the Bible, 1611]

Such examples as (6), extremely common from the sixteenth century, indicate that the progressive in English in large part, though by no means exclusively, derived from the preposition *on/a* + a gerund. Suffice it to say here that in written English the prefix *a*-/prepositional *a* was by no means uncommon in writing (i.e., not used consciously to represent speech) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in both England and America. We can observe it, for example, in the journals of James Boswell:

7. Sat till it was rather too late for church. Thought I would go and see Mr David Hume, who was returned from London and Bath, just A-DYING. [James Boswell, 1776; in Milne 2003, 256]

Hartley (2004, 18) cites six examples by four of the authors of the Lewis and Clark journals (1804–6). Many further cases could be cited to support *DARE*’s judgment that it has occurred very widely in the United States. When the prefix on present participles may have begun to be stroked by editors’ pens is impossible to ascertain, but in Britain it had begun receiving notice in manuals of prescriptive grammar by the mid-1700s; Sundby, Bjørge, and Haugland (1991, 91) indicate that 12 of the approximately 150 volumes they index label the usage: “colloquial” (8), “improper” (3), and “corrupt” (1). As opposed to a feature of popular speech, there seems little evidence of its being viewed as one of dialect or rusticity until around the middle of the nineteenth century, as it came to be displayed in the speech of characters (white and black) in backwoods and local color fiction. From this its association with Appalachian speech no doubt evolved, but that it was considered as

generally a rustic usage rather than a distinctly Appalachian or archaic one can be deduced by the fact that early commentators on mountain speech did not find it noteworthy, in contrast to numerous other usages they cited.

Only in the English of Appalachia has quantified scrutiny and formal analysis of the prefix been undertaken, primarily in the pioneering work of Walt Wolfram and his colleagues (Wolfram 1976, 1980, 1982, 1988; Wolfram and Christian 1976; Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988). Feagin (1979) has undertaken a quantitative study of the prefix in Anniston, Alabama, on the southern fringe of Appalachia, as has Hackenberg (1972) in Nicholas County, West Virginia. Whereas evidence from linguistic atlas and other investigations has documented the incidence of the prefix, those studies provide little if any basis for exploring internal linguistic constraints that govern it since they record only one token per speaker. For such an effort, a large number of occurrences must be collected and then analyzed quantitatively. This Wolfram and his colleagues have done for the largest amount of data to date, for 860 tokens of the present participle (183, or 21.3%, of which take the prefix) in two counties of southeastern West Virginia (Mercer and Monroe), where interviewing was conducted in 1975 (Wolfram and Christian 1976, 69–76).

Wolfram has demonstrated elegantly and convincingly the systematic nature of the prefix, apparently a semantically empty form, in the speech of one area in central Appalachia that provides ample testable findings. He concludes that “neither phonological nor syntactic explanations are adequate by themselves, but together they account for the systematic occurrence of the form” (Wolfram 1976, 52). The present study builds on Wolfram’s work by testing his findings for the speech of southern Appalachia, in a six-county section of the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. In the process it seeks two things: (1) a more detailed understanding of the contexts in which the prefix occurs, which in turn will help researchers address questions about the evolution of *a*-prefixing (where it has been and where it may be going); and (2) the extent to which we can generalize about *a*-prefixing more broadly in Appalachia. The latter will help us answer whether “Appalachian English” can be posited as an entity.

Applying the label “Appalachian” to data from small parts of the larger region up to 300 miles distant from one another has been such a common practice in scholarly literature (cf. Hackenberg 1972, on one county in central West Virginia, to Montgomery 1979, on one county in central East Tennessee) that “Appalachian English” has become a loose construct for a large region and indeed even for speakers from disparate parts of the mountains who have formed communities elsewhere (Anderson 2006). The implicit claim

made by those employing this usage is that their data are representative of a large region that, depending on the definition one adopts, covers 8–13 states. The Appalachian Regional Commission's demarcation, established in 1965 and based on socioeconomic as well as topographical criteria, is one of the most expansive, stretching from New York to Mississippi. Wolfram and Christian (1976) adopt the generic title *Appalachian Speech* (rather than "West Virginian" or another more restricted label), but they do carefully and explicitly detail the sample of 52 working-class speakers whose speech their study analyzes and the two counties in which these speakers live, arguing that the counties are demographically similar to many others in the region.

The validity of the construct "Appalachian English" is important and testable with regard to both its uniformity across the region and its distinctiveness from other regions. At the very least, usage of the term raises more general questions of whether and when superordinate labels should be applied to findings based on local site studies. Appalachia is far from the only region about which linguists and other social scientists routinely generalize their findings to a large territory, but it does have a long history of being perceived as uniform by outsiders, a view still strongly prevalent in the twenty-first century.

In differentiating prefixed from nonprefixed forms, contemporary researchers have more than anything else sought to identify the presumed semantic property or properties of the variable prefix. Proposals have included those by Stewart (1967, 10, based on a few random observations) that the prefix conveys "indefiniteness" in space and time; by Hackenberg (1972, based on a forced-choice test of sentences with different adverbial phrases) that it is a marker of "intermittent activity" or "duration"; and by Feagin (1979, 107, based on more than 200 examples from sociolinguistic interviews she conducted) that it often signals "intensified action" or "immediate or dramatic vividness." Each of these researchers characterizes the meaning of the prefix as a tendency and does not claim that it always or only conveys such a meaning.

Wolfram evaluates the three foregoing proposals and, finding no test for predicting its context(s), concludes that there is "no formal evidence for a distinct semantic category of *a*-prefixing" (1976, 55). A decade later he qualifies his position, conceding that the prefix "may fill some special, albeit nonunique function in conversational discourse" (1988, 247), either as a "form that stylistically favors intensity without uniquely specifying it semantically" (248) or as a "marker of older, more rural vernacular style" (249). While I broadly agree with Wolfram's original arguments of "no formal semantic justification," it is interesting to note in passing some possible support for

Feagin's view that *a*-prefixing co-occurs with the intensifying adverb *just*. In the data at hand nearly half (58/120) of the *-ing*-participial phrases in which *just* occurs also have the prefixing, as in sentence (8):

8. [The] old panther was up there just A-PANTING, just A-WAVING his feet like that, and just fixing to jump on him. [CSME, M81, 1973]

However difficult a semantic property may be to pinpoint, speakers who use the prefix natively often, in my experience, insist they have some kind of "feel" for what the prefix conveys. However, none of them has been able to articulate exactly what this elusive feature may be. From close scrutiny of three narratives, Dumas (1988) offers a very tentative but provocative hypothesis of a discourse value, that clauses expressing complicating action disfavor prefixed forms and favor nonprefixed ones, a proposal that would seem in opposition to ones made by other researchers. Her explicit suggestion of a discourse property of the prefix, upon reflection, points to the fact that the other proposals noted here are discourse-related as well. Indeed, Feagin states that "my hypothesis [is] that the meaning of the prefixed present participle is that of the addition of emphasis, immediacy, and vividness to the verb phrase itself and, more generally, to the discourse" (1979, 110). If the prefix is linked to discourse meaning rather than to a more local phrasal one, this may well test the methodologies of ingenious future analysts of discourse and style shifting to predict the contexts of occurrence that it has. Further attention to the issue of "meaning" lies beyond the present study. However, the claim made by many commentators that *a*-prefixing is in steady decline overlooks the fact that even though it is a form with no discernible aspectual or other grammatical meaning having at best a vague and occasional function in discourse, reports of its demise may well be premature. It has certainly been a very long time *a*-dying, and if, as Feagin and Wolfram propose, it has acquired the property of vernacularity for some speakers, it will be a longer time still for it to disappear.

#### POSSIBLE TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTIONS

Given that its ultimate source was apparently most often the preposition *on* and from other structural facts, we would expect the prefix *a*- in Appalachian and other varieties of English to be (and probably to have been) governed to a significant degree by both syntactic and phonological constraints, and this is indeed what Wolfram's research has established. As suggested above, *a*-prefixing was no stranger to literary English in recent centuries, but its use

in popular speech could have had regional dimensions in the British Isles pertinent to its occurrence in the United States. Three possibilities suggest themselves: (1) Gaelic-speaking areas, that is, southern and western Ireland for Irish Gaelic and northern and western Scotland for Scottish Gaelic; (2) England; and (3) Ulster (northeastern Ireland) and Lowland Scotland (where antecedents of many other grammatical features in Appalachian speech have been found; see Montgomery 1997).

From both the historical record and contemporary evidence, only the second of these possibilities is supportable. The first one has been argued as based on surface similarity to verbal noun constructions in Irish Gaelic (Hickey 1998) and Scottish Gaelic (Dietrich 1981), as in *Tha a e' briscedh chlach(an)* 'He is at breaking of stones'. But this proposal founders on the erroneous beliefs that speakers of the two closely related Celtic languages came to the interior of North America in the eighteenth century and that *a*-prefixing was prevalent in the speech of such emigrants. For an assessment of this case, see Montgomery (2000). Amateur Celtophiles in the United States whose imaginations it has captured raise the claim of Irish or Scottish influence from time to time, but it has no credibility if for no other reason than that all the morphological material for the prefix was present in earlier English. On the other hand, European scholars, such as Tristram (1999) and Filppula (2003), have recently posited a latent Brythonic effect (i.e., from Welsh) that contributed to the rise of the progressive in English, the only Germanic tongue in which it has fully fledged, and so that a Celtic influence may have accelerated the general drift of English from a synthetic language to a more analytic one in Late Middle and Early Modern English.

Wright in his *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898, 3, s.v. *a* pref.<sup>1</sup>) finds the prefix prevalent in the South and Midlands of England.<sup>4</sup> Upton, Parry, and Widdowson (1994, 497) indicate that the England-wide Survey of English Dialects, conducted under Harold Orton in the 1950s, found the same geographical distribution (among older, more rural, and less-educated and less-traveled men). But settlers from southern England and their descendants came and spread throughout the United States, and they almost certainly brought the prefix often in the speech.

The Ulster claim is more intriguing, in that it would have involved the prefix occurring on passive participles. As a brief historical aside, but one that elaborates on the earlier development of *a*-prefixing, we may note Traugott's (1972, 144) statement that "when the Agent is absent in an [Early Modern English] sentence with progressive *be* + *PrP* [i.e., present participle] and an action verb like *make*, *do*, *commit*, *bring*, *prepare*, a passive interpretation is often given to the sentence." Such cases can be found in Shakespeare:

9. she has been too long A-TALKING of / the lady is disloyal. [*Much Ado about Nothing* 3.2.91–92, 1600]
10. Let us seem humbler after it is done / Than when it was A-DOING. [*Coriolanus* 4.2.50–51, 1623]

The prefix is attested in nineteenth-century Ulster emigrant letters, but not frequently. Boling (1995) found five citations between 1819 and 1889 in his large collection of letters written back home to the province.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, two of these are passive:

11. the Land in this part of the Country is A SETELING fast [1848, Carroll family letters]
12. they are no money in the country nor no buisness [*sic*] A DOING [1867, Witherow family letters]

In my own research I have turned up a further example of the prefix on a passive participle from the journal of an Ulster emigrant, this one with an explicit *by*-phrase.

13. I did not know till today that there are in the second cabin some families of English people A SENDING out to America by the parishes to which they belonged there for the purpose of geting rid of them. ["Journal of a Voyage on Board the Ship 'Glasgow,'" Liverpool to New York, October to December 1833, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D280, p. 26]

As unusual as these constructions may appear, they are in line with other observations. Todd (1989, 1990) and Fenton (1995) indicate that the prefix is found on passive verbs in modern-day Ulster speech. Among their examples are (14)–(17):

14. The door was A SHUTTIN' when I left. 'The door was closing [i.e., being shut] when I cut out.' [Todd 1989, 43]
15. The woman's A KILLIN'. 'The woman is being killed.' [Todd 1990, 19]
16. [I'm] A CALLIN'. '[I am] being called.' [Fenton 1995, 1]
17. Where's he A BURYIN'? 'Where is he going/planning to be buried?' [Fenton, pers. comm., 1995]

To account for this construction, Todd (1989, 19) posits a convergence between substratal influence from Irish and superstratal influence from Early Modern English. Perhaps more significantly, both Todd (pers. comm., 1991) and Fenton (pers. comm., 1995) state that, other than with certain fixed collocations, the prefix (though infrequent) is construed with *ONLY* passive interpretation today. Given its historic rarity in Ulster English and its tendency to be passive there, the prevalence of *a*-prefixing in Appalachia



is almost certainly not due to earlier transatlantic influence from Ulster. The passive interpretation, so far as I am aware, has never been noted in American speech.

#### COMPARATIVE APPALACHIAN ANALYSIS

Strictly on synchronic grounds and building in part on arguments by Bolinger (1971), Wolfram (1980) derives the *a-* prefix on present participles from an abstract preposition. Such a derivation is consistent with the diachronic facts presented earlier, but whether all manifestations of *a-* as a prefix in Appalachian speech can be so derived is far from clear, given its surface syntactic heterogeneity (noted as well in Wolfram and Christian 1976, 74). The prefix occurs on forms other than present participles, though far less often and not at frequencies easily investigated quantitatively. These include past participles (18), adverbial nouns (19), adjectives (20), adverbs (21), and prepositions (22):

18. Past Participles<sup>6</sup>
  - a. I would get them [i.e., oxen] A-GENTLED up, and then I put the yoke on them. [CSME, M, 1969]
  - b. Now, they's people gets lost in these Smoky Mountains, specially before the park has A-OPENED up so many bridle trails. [CSME, M63, 1954]
19. Adverbial Nouns
  - a. I went back down A-SUNDAY. [CSME, M67, 1939]
  - b. I went a-bear-hunting once A FOURTH OF JULY, and I went down to the branch where one had been a-using. [CSME, M25, 1939]
20. Adjectives
  - a. I had some to die off A-YOUNG, too. [CSME, M, 1978]
  - b. You were A-SCARED of that place. [Montgomery and Hall 2004, 2]
21. Adverbs
  - a. They went ahead there and went to running A-BACKWARDS and forwards. [CSME, M50, 1939]
  - b. He rode A-HORSEBACK all the time. [CSME, M66, 1957]
22. Prepositions
  - a. The bear, it made a pass A-TOWARD him. [CSME, M81, 1939]
  - b. He went up around Cherokee Orchard Road and down A-PAST our house. [CSME, F, 1973]

(For more examples, see Montgomery and Hall 2004, s.v. *a-* prefix, and *DARE*).

The present article analyzes data from the 400,000-word Corpus of Smoky Mountain English (CSME), a compilation of transcribed interviews with 136

speakers from a six-county section of the Tennessee/North Carolina border region. They were born between 1843 and 1915 (most before 1900) and recorded between 1939 and 1984. In this corpus the prefix occurs on 1,053 of 2,892 present participles, 36.4% of the total. This study will concentrate on *a*-prefixing on present participles and, like Wolfram's work, considers only structural, not social, variation.

The English of the Smoky Mountains offers an appropriate comparison to that investigated by Wolfram and Christian in southeastern West Virginia, approximately 200 miles to the northeast. Since there is a shared ancestor variety for the areas, the English of southwestern Virginia of the late eighteenth century, similarities between them would point to commonalities datable to that time and earlier.

### QUALITATIVE CONSTRAINTS

Wolfram (1976; 1980; 1982, 4–5) posits four qualitative constraints for *a*-prefixing, based on his West Virginia data. Through forced-choice tests he and his colleagues have consistently shown that these constraints operate in Appalachian speech as well as for speakers of varieties in which the prefix is rarely, if ever, used (Wolfram 1982). Two of the constraints are syntactic, prohibiting the prefix before a true gerund or after a preposition. Two others are phonological, prohibiting the prefix before an unstressed syllable or before an initial vowel on an *-ing* present participle. A verb form like *a-asking* is permissible syntactically, Wolfram argues, but it does not surface because of a "general phonological restriction" against sequential vowels in English (1980, 125). The Corpus of Smoky Mountain English<sup>7</sup> provides counterexamples to all four of these constraints, though these are quite rare, only three tokens in each case.<sup>8</sup>

As in West Virginia, *a*-prefixing in the Smokies never occurs on *-ing* forms that are adjectival (either predicative or attributive), as in (23) and (24). Nor does it occur on gerunds having determiners or possessives, as in (25) and (26).

- 23. \*He was A-MISSING for two years.
- 24. \*They didn't have any Sunday School or any worship outside of the A-PREACHING service once a month.
- 25. \*I don't know if the A-COOKING was any better than the old-fashioned cooking.
- 26. \*He moved off of Little River before they got up to Elkmont with their A-LOGGING.

However, while there is no doubt that *a*-prefixing on *-ing* forms is overwhelmingly limited to participles having verbal or adverbial functions, it does occur on gerunds or verbal nouns in the Smokies. Sentences (27)–(29) show this. Each of these sentences can be phrased to answer the question “what?” of the gerundive phrase or can be pronominalized by *it* or *that*. Thus, one might ask “What do they call it?” for which (27) would be a plausible answer. It is thus not strictly true that “*a*-prefixing is not permissible in so-called gerunds or gerundive constructions,” contra Wolfram (1982, 4).

27. They put him [to] what they call A-SCALING the lumber. [CSME, M58, 1969]
28. We’d make us a little ball by unraveling a yarn sock and A-WINDING it. [CSME, M62, 1973]
29. [We didn’t have permission to swim there] without asking him, or [without] going home and then A-COMING back. [CSME, M79, 1980]

Sentences (28)–(30) show that the prefix can occur on an *-ing* form governed by a preposition, with (30) being the clearest case. Sentences (28) and (29) have the prefix on only the second member of a conjoined gerund phrase, and one might argue that the constraint is weakened somewhat beyond the immediate context of the preposition. No such explanation is possible for (30), however.

30. He fought on the Union side and got a pension, and after A-DRAWING hit he turned over with the enemy. [CSME, M, 1973]

Identifying no instances of *a*-prefixing following a preposition in West Virginia, Wolfram concludes on this and other synchronic grounds that “all *a*-prefixed participial forms are derived from prepositional phrases and that *a*- itself comes from a preposition” (1980, 117). The prohibition may not be absolutely watertight, as shown by the Smokies data, but it remains a very strong and useful generalization. Some cases that at first appear to violate the constraint can be seen to involve a verbal particle (*go in* ‘enter’) rather than a preposition, as in (31):

31. Now you boys that wants to go in A-SWIMMING, . . . you’uns get a permit from you’unse’s parents. [CSME, M66, 1981]

One particular structure in the English of Appalachia alluded to earlier exhibits properties of both a participle (as a manner adverbial) and a gerund (having a following prepositional phrase) and can be seen in (32) and (33). It is quite common in the writing of nineteenth-century local fiction,

including the Sut Lovingood tales of George Washington Harris (1814–67), written and set in the hills of East Tennessee. To show that this pattern is not strictly a literary device and a carryover from earlier English (the *OED* has at least one thirteenth-century example and several thereafter), we can cite sentence (33), from an older speaker in North Carolina in 1996 (which I verified from a recording). There are no instances of this in CSME, but perhaps (33) suggests that the evolution of gerunds into progressive verb phrases has proceeded more slowly than previously thought and might explain why a residue of similar patterns (28–30) does show up in CSME.

32. I swar they'd a mauled him good ef they had kotch him A EATIN ove hit.  
[1858; in Harris 1967, 119]
33. He said he took his rifle, and took a drink of liquor, and went on A-HUNTING  
of them. [1995; in Woodring 1996, 8]

As indicated, Wolfram also posits two categorical phonological constraints, which prohibit *a*-prefixing before an unstressed syllable and before a vowel. The Smoky Mountain data has 44 participles with an initial unstressed syllable; of these, 3 (6.8%) take *a*-prefixing, seen in (34)–(36).

34. There must be, you know, a reason, I mean, for 'em A-BELIEVING in the  
signs [of the zodiac]. [CSME, F72, 1978]
35. I can remember Dad A-RELATING the fire to me. [CSME, M, 1976]
36. They didn't think they was enough that they could function as a church, so  
I told 'em they could, got 'em A-BELIEVING they could. [CSME, M, 1972]

Table 1 compares the numbers and percentages of three types of following stress patterns, verbs having, respectively, one primary stressed syllable, an initial syllable that is unstressed (sometimes partially reduced, as in 36) and is followed by a stressed syllable, or two primary stressed syllables on a compound verb. The prefix is twice as likely to occur for the third type as it

TABLE 1  
A-Prefixing by Stress Pattern of Following Participle in the Smoky Mountains

			<i>VARBRUL</i> Weight
One Primary Stress Syllable ( <i>a-telling</i> )	1,028/2,815	(36.5%)	.50
Unstressed Syllable ( <i>a-believing</i> )	3/44	(6.8%)	.11
Two Primary Stress Syllables ( <i>a-deer driving</i> , <i>a-bear hunting</i> )	23/33	(69.7%)	.85
TOTAL	1,054/2,892	(36.4%)	

is overall. Examples of this type, attested for only two base verbs (*hunt* and *drive*), include (37) and (38). Compounded verbs used as present participles are quite rare, but one is led to speculate whether occurrence of the prefix only on these verbs in particular has something to do with the “older, more rural vernacular style” proposed by Wolfram for occurrence of the prefix. Wolfram (1980, 112) also cites examples of this (*a-deer huntin'*, *a-pheasant huntin'*, *a-squirrel huntin'*).

37. Way back I guess forty year ago, there was a crowd of us going up Deep Creek A-DEER DRIVING. [CSME, M79, 1939]  
 38. The dogs lit across the mountain and went into Tennessee. [We] didn't do no good A-BEAR HUNTING. [CSME, M67, 1939]

Wolfram's second phonological constraint is against the prefix appearing on participles beginning with a vowel. As for unstressed syllables, the Smoky Mountain corpus has 44 tokens of *-ing*-verbs beginning with a vowel. Three of these (39–41) show *a*-prefixing.

39. Johnny run down the hill A-AIMING to go to his uncle's. [CSME, M81, 1939]  
 40. I noticed two older girls A-EATING something out of a little syrup bucket. [CSME, F, 1973]  
 41. I went on up and was A-AIMING to get around above the tree and shoot. [CSME, M40, 1939]

Table 2 shows that the prefix is highly disfavored before a following vowel and much rarer than before other types of phonological segments. But in this context too it does occur.

TABLE 2  
A-Prefixing by Following Segment Type in the Smoky Mountains

			<i>VARBRUL</i> Weight
Consonants	1,051/2,848	(36.9%)	
Liquids	146/331	(44.1%)	.61
Glides	155/356	(43.5%)	.58
Obstruents	731/2,087	(35.0%)	.48
Nasals	19/74	(25.7%)	.39
Vowels	3/44	(6.8%)	.12
TOTAL	1,054/2,892	(36.4%)	

## QUANTITATIVE CONDITIONING

The exceptions to Wolfram's constraints on *a*-prefixing identified here suggest that, once a much larger corpus of data is examined, his categories are found to be, not surprisingly, slightly gradient. The evidence presented so far indicates very close parallels between southeastern West Virginia and the Smoky Mountains, supporting a common inheritance. This can be seen as well in that all of the types of variable syntactic patterns identified by Wolfram (1980) are found also in the Smoky Mountains. These include use of the prefix on participles in progressive verb phrases (42), in relatives reduced by WHIZ-deletion (i.e., deletion of the relativizer *who* or *which* and the form of *be*) (43), following verbs of perception (44), following verbs of movement (45), in adverbial phrases (46), following verbs of starting (47), following verbs of continuing, especially *keep* (48), and in series (49).

42. I was just A-DEVILING this boy. [CSME, M95, 1939]
43. I've got two uncles A-LIVING. [CSME, M, 1973]
44. I seen him A-COMING down to the branch to get water. [CSME, M25, 1939]
45. I heard the old big [bear] come just A-FLYING, A-SNORTING like a big horse. [CSME, F, 1973]
46. That little cub liked to run out the top of the tree just A-SQUALLING and A-CRYING. [CSME, M63, 1954]
47. About ten o'clock in the day it began A-SNOWING. [CSME, M45, 1939]
48. They kept A-WRITING to us, and I told my wife, I says, we ain't a-signing nothing. [CSME, M, 1973]
49. Him and his brother-in-law one night back years ago, about forty [years ago], went out A-BEAR HUNTING, A-POSSUM HUNTING. [CSME, M70, 1939]

The frequency ordering of *a*-prefixing by type of phrasal context is somewhat different between West Virginia and the Smoky Mountains, however. Wolfram (1980, 110) states that "*a*-prefixed forms without an overt form of *be* are most common with verbs of perception, such as *see* and *hear*," and he presents the relative frequency of three categories (following verbs of movement, in progressive verb phrases, and following verbs of continuing, i.e., *keep*) for the 13 most active users of the prefix. As seen in table 3, in West Virginia he finds the prefix after *keep* twice as common as in progressive verb phrases, whereas data from the Smokies reverses this order, with respect to these three categories, and finds the prefix most frequent following verbs of movement. A more detailed view of occurrence of the prefix in types of verb phrases in the Smokies is presented in table 4. Each type is exemplified in (50)–(55). Preceding causative verbs show the highest rate of co-occurrence with *a*-prefixing.

TABLE 3  
A-Prefixing by Type of Verb Phrase

	<i>Smoky Mountains</i>		<i>West Virginia</i>	
Verbs of movement ( <i>come, go, etc.</i> )	46/102	(45.1%)	21/74	(28.4%)
Progressive verbs	566/1,571	(36.0%)	130/646	(20.1%)
<i>keep</i>	20/71	(28.2%)	16/39	(41.0%)

TABLE 4  
A-Prefixing by Type of Verb Phrase in the Smoky Mountains

			<i>VARBRUL</i> <i>Weight</i>
Causative verbs	12/23	(52.2%)	.70
Verbs of perception ( <i>see, hear, etc.</i> )	47/110	(42.7%)	.58
Progressive verb <i>be</i>	566/1,571	(36.0%)	.51
Verbs of movement ( <i>come, go, etc.</i> )	46/102	(45.1%)	.50
<i>keep</i>	20/71	(28.2%)	.39
Inchoative verbs ( <i>start, etc.</i> )	9/66	(13.6%)	.19
TOTAL	700/1,943	(36.0%)	

50. Following a Causative Verb  
Get you a sourwood switch and have it A-STANDING up at the door. [CSME, F70, 1939]
51. Following a Verb of Perception  
We heard the dogs A-BARKING when I left him. [CSME, M54, 1939]
52. Following an Auxiliary *be*  
The dog was just A-GRABBING at them. [CSME, M86, 1939]
53. Following a Verb of Movement  
Him and his brother-in-law one night back years ago, about forty [years ago], went out A-BEAR HUNTING, A-POSSUM HUNTING. [CSME, M70, 1939]
54. Following *keep*  
I kept A-WORKING around, trying to get a shot at him. [CSME, M54, 1939]
55. Following an Inchoative Verb  
About ten o'clock in the day it began A-SNOWING. [CSME, M45, 1939]

A final syntactic constraint proposed by Wolfram to consider pertains to conjoined participles, phrases like *a-coming and a-going*. Wolfram (1976, 51–52) refers to this pattern as the “alliterative device” because the West Virginia data strongly favors the prefix on both forms (12 of the 16 possible cases). He also argues that, when appearing on one of the conjoined forms, the prefix is more likely on the second (as in 56) than on the first (as in 57)

in a sentence. The Smoky Mountain data, summarized in table 5, is quite different, showing that the prefix is far more likely on only the first verb (58 and 59). The only two patterns from the Smoky Mountains like the one in (56) are (28) and (29), cited earlier, and the apparent status of these as gerunds makes it unclear that the corpus has any examples conforming to the dominant tendency that Wolfram found.

56. I heard her BARKING AND A-BARKIN' AND A-BARKIN'. [Wolfram 1976, 52]  
 57. ?I heard her A-BARKIN' AND BARKING AND BARKING. [Wolfram 1976, 52]  
 58. You ought to [have] seen us all A-JUMPING AND RUNNING. [CSME, 1975]  
 59. They'd have a big time A-SHOUTING AND PREACHING AND SINGING. [CSME, 1954]

Two further questions regarding *a*-prefixing suggested by the alliterative constraint are whether the nature of the following and preceding phonological segment has an influence on the occurrence of the prefix. Table 6 shows that following voiced segments in general (except for vowels, which are for all practical purposes ruled out by a constraint discussed earlier) take the prefix more often than voiceless ones do, the only major exception to this

TABLE 5  
*A*-Prefixing in Conjoined Phrases in the Smoky Mountains

Prefix on only first form ( <i>a-jumping and running</i> )	36 (38.3%)
Prefix on both/all forms ( <i>a-squawling and a-crying</i> )	11 (11.7%)
Prefix on only second form ( <i>going home and then a-coming back</i> )	2 (2.1%)
Prefix on no forms ( <i>sitting and watching</i> )	45 (47.9%)
TOTAL	94

TABLE 6  
*A*-Prefixing by Following Segment Type in the Smoky Mountains

Glides	155/356 (43.5%)
/y/	5/9 (55.6%)
/w/	76/170 (44.7%)
/h/	74/177 (41.8%)
/l/	105/213 (49.3%)
Voiced obstruents	385/945 (40.7%)
/r/	41/118 (34.7%)
Voiceless obstruents	346/1,142 (30.3%)
Nasals	19/74 (25.7%)
Vowels	3/44 (6.8%)
TOTAL	1,054/2,892 (36.4%)



TABLE 7  
A-Prefixing by Preceding Segment Type

Consonants	938/2,347	(40.0%)
Nasals	228/449	(50.8%)
Obstruents	632/1,544	(40.9%)
Voiceless	198/482	(41.1%)
Voiced	434/1,062	(40.9%)
Liquids	78/354	(22.0%)
/l/	28/81	(34.6%)
/r/	50/273	(18.3%)
Vowels	72/204	(35.3%)
TOTAL	1,010/2,551	(39.6%)

being nasals. The resulting distribution reminds one slightly of a sonority hierarchy, but the evidence for this is obviously quite limited (for example, /r/ and nasals do not occur in the order they would be predicted), and it would be best to conclude that, other than for vowels, the type of following segment does not have an influence on when the prefix occurs. Similar negative findings are seen for preceding phonological environments, with regard to the type of segment (table 7) or the presence of stress on the preceding syllable.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study supports Wolfram's general conclusion that *a*-prefixing on present participles is fundamentally both a syntactic and a phonological phenomenon today. In many ways his findings are consistent with two smaller studies carried out in Appalachia, Hackenberg (1972) on central West Virginia and Feagin (1979) on northeastern Alabama, enabling him to posit a general pattern and common properties for the English of both central and southern Appalachia (Wolfram 1980). By pursuing a replication—too seldom undertaken—of an original and detailed study, the present, larger investigation demonstrates the seminal value of Wolfram's research and brings a deeper and broader understanding of the region's speech. The present area of study, midway between Wolfram's and Feagin's sites, shows similarities but also some relatively minor differences in the patterning of *a*-prefixing in the Smoky Mountains. With the principal exception of the constraint involving conjoined participles, the same constraints operate, but several heretofore deemed categorical in West Virginia do not behave so farther south. The evidence from the Smokies suggests one of at least two things.

First, the much larger data set from the Smokies (more than five times as many tokens of *a*-prefixing) may reveal patterns that are disfavored and recessive but that are not in principle impermissible. Wolfram argues that a general prohibition against sequential vowels in English prevents forms like *a-aiming* from occurring. However, such an argument cannot be sustained for Smoky Mountain English, if for no other reason than that sequential vowels occur elsewhere. Consider noun phrases having an indefinite article, for instance. Phrases like *a axe*, *a ear of corn*, and *a uncle* occur frequently in the CSME. Examples like *a address* (with a following unstressed syllable) are sporadic as well. Given all this, *a*-prefixing before a vowel or an unstressed syllable can be seen as natural and predictable, and with further investigation Wolfram might well have identified examples in West Virginia. It is inappropriate to use exclusively the results of forced-choice tests to infer categorical status or the nonoccurrence of the prefix in certain environments, as has sometimes been done. Such procedures can indicate the rule-based nature of variation and which constraints more strongly govern this variation, but they can show only qualitative constraints, in this case where the *a*- prefix is disfavored. Findings from forced-choice tests should always be compared to data collected from observed speech and corpus-based studies. Unfortunately, historical corpora with extensive evidence of *a*-prefixing are rare if nonexistent. The 97 instances of *a*-prefixing on present participles in the *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* (2006), which brings together a host of speech-based texts of six genres, are insufficient to test quantitatively many of the proposals made by American linguists in the late twentieth century, once the data are broken down according to time period and other categories.

Second, the prefix on gerunds and after prepositions is found in the early history of *a*-prefixing in English and thus could perhaps be thought a retention rather than an innovation, but possibly as extensions by individual speakers of the contexts in which the prefix is permitted, reflecting the loosening or an erosion of constraints. The latter phenomenon is well known in language decay, however, and may be one sign confirming that a linguistic feature is declining, especially if it occurs at so low a rate and for speakers so sporadically. However, the three speakers who employed the prefix in this way are among the youngest included in the CSME. Is mountain speech in West Virginia and in the Smoky Mountains on different trajectories? Though it will be harder to find, it will be interesting to examine where the prefix occurs for speakers in the Smoky Mountains younger than those included in the CSME.

That the prefix occurs before vowels and unstressed syllables is very unlikely to be anything but a predictable, if not so common, occurrence. For the syntactic constraints, this study establishes overwhelming similar-

ity, but also suggests limited evidence for difference, between *a*-prefixing in West Virginia and the Smoky Mountains. On this matter the feature is somewhat gradient and does not pattern in a uniform and categorical manner in southern and central Appalachia, and “Appalachian English” is somewhat more heterogeneous than previously thought. Comparable corpora of speech from elsewhere in Appalachia are needed to substantiate this possibility (data from forced-choice tests can never do this). It may well be, of course, that both phonological and syntactic constraints on the prefix identified by Wolfram are very general and have prevailed in English for centuries, but for the categories of preceding verb types, this is far less likely. For this, corpora are needed from outside Appalachia (including from earlier periods of the language) to ascertain whether the region’s English in general is distinctive qualitatively (in constraints that govern the prefix) or quantitatively (in the strength of these constraints). Further tracking of the prefix will bring us closer to understanding both the uniformity and the distinctiveness of the region’s speech. It may show that “vernacularity” of style will insulate the prefix from demise, and, who knows, that may turn out to be a trend to watch.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 32nd New Ways of Analyzing Variation conference in Philadelphia, October 11–14, 2003. I am grateful to Walt Wolfram for his reactions and comments to an earlier version. I also thank Jeremy Graves, whom I guided in a directed-readings course in the spring of 2007 on the topic of *a*-prefixing. Discussions during that semester clarified several of the issues presented here.

1. The examples in this study come from one of two sources: (1) the Corpus of Smoky Mountain English (CSME), from which the speakers are identified by sex, age, and date of recording when possible; or (2) the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (Montgomery and Hall 2004). The interviews which comprise CSME come from three projects: (1) Joseph Sargent Hall’s fieldwork, initially sponsored by the National Park Service in Tennessee and North Carolina, beginning in 1937 (for details, see Montgomery 2003); (2) oral history recordings of older former residents of the Great Smoky Mountains, conducted by the National Park Service between 1954 and 1983; and (3) recordings of residents in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains that I conducted in 1978 (for details, see Montgomery 1979). All interviews were transcribed by me.
2. Here “Midland” refers to the territory outlined by linguistic atlas research (Kurath 1949; Kurath and McDavid 1961, etc.)
3. I am grateful to Jeremy Graves for this tabulation of Shakespeare’s usage of the prefix.

4. In his dictionary Wright (1898) also attributes the prefix to Ireland and Scotland but provides only one citation from the former and none from the latter. His information on distribution of the form seems uncertain on several grounds.
5. I am grateful to Bruce D. Boling for sharing a copy of this magnificent compendium with me.
6. The prefix on past participles may have an entirely different source from the one on present participles, perhaps from Middle English *y-* (ultimately from Old English *ge-*, the common West Germanic marker of past participle). This feature is now a relic form in southwest England; cf. *OED a-* prep 6 and *a-* participle.
7. See note 1.
8. Feagin found one exception to Wolfram's constraints: *a-ironin'*.

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