

19 African American English

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1 Introduction

In the study of ethnic dialect in the history of English, no dialect has received more attention than African American English. It is by far the most scrutinized dialect of American English (Schneider, 1996), and has now become widely recognized throughout the English-speaking world. Within the last several decades, it has gone through a number of name changes, which include *Negro Dialect*, *Nonstandard Negro English*, *Black English*, *Black English Vernacular*, *Afro-American English*, *African American (Vernacular) English*, *African American Language*, and *Ebonics*. To some extent, these name changes simply have been aligned with changes in naming practices related to the classification of black Americans, but their significance goes deeper than that; in fact, they often relate to underlying issues of racial politics and ethnic ideologies in American society. Though most popularly referred to now as Ebonics, thanks to a widely publicized and highly controversial School Board resolution adopted in Oakland, California, in the late 1990s, most linguists prefer terms such as African American English (AAE) or African American Language because of the strong emotional reactions and racist parodies sometimes engendered by the use of the term Ebonics.

The literature on AAE is vast, and covers a full range of issues – from AAE's origin and early development to its current social capital and educational vulnerability. Its controversial nature is rooted in the fact that the language of black Americans has served as a proxy for wider social and political issues related to the negotiation of racial categories and ethnic identities. This chapter, however, is limited to the linguistic issues related to AAE, including its descriptive base, its genesis and early development, and its current path of change.

2 The Descriptive Base of AAE

The distinctiveness of AAE among the vernacular dialects of American English is an ongoing controversy, though there is little dispute that AAE differs significantly from benchmark European American vernacular varieties in most non-Southern, urban contexts. Given a randomly selected set of audio-recordings whose content contains no culturally identifying material, listeners can accurately identify African American speakers approximately 80 percent of the time (Graff, Labov, and Harris, 1986; Shuy, Baratz, and Wolfram, 1969; Thomas, 2002; Thomas and Reaser, forthcoming). Determining the perceptual basis of this identification, however, is not nearly as straightforward as making the ethnic classification. Linguistically, different levels of language organization may be involved, ranging from minute segmental and suprasegmental phonetic details (Thomas, 2002) to generalized discourse strategies and conversational routines (Smitherman, 1977). Socially, demographic factors such as status, region, and level of education affect listeners' perceptions of ethnic identity, as do interactional factors such as interlocutors and speech setting. Given the array of linguistic, social, and personal variables in identification experiments, different studies may, in fact, show a wide range of reliable ethnic identification. Thus, the ethnicity of some African American speakers in certain contexts may be identified correctly less than 5 percent of the time while other speakers are correctly identified more than 95 percent of the time (Thomas and Reaser, forthcoming).

Region, status, and other sociocultural attributes are also important in determining the structural relationship of AAE to comparable European American vernacular varieties. AAE is rooted historically in Southern-based, rural varieties, so it is structurally more similar to these varieties than it is to its Northern vernacular counterparts, but the development of AAE into a recognized sociocultural variety in the twentieth century has become strongly associated with its use in non-Southern, urban areas.

Though the relationship of African American and European American speech is still not totally resolved after several decades of heated debate, some agreement is emerging. Following is a partial list of prominent phonological and grammatical features of AAE from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) that are most likely to differentiate AAE from comparable European American vernacular varieties. More extensive lists of the phonological and morphosyntactic traits of AAE (Bailey, 2001; Bailey and Thomas, 1998; Cukor-Avila, 2001; Fasold and Wolfram, 1970; Green, 2002; Labov, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Rickford, 1999; Thomas, 2001; Wolfram, 1994) may include dozens of phonological and grammatical structures. In addition, there are features on other linguistic levels, including prosodic and pragmatic features, but these have not yet been described in nearly the same detail as phonology and morphosyntax.

Some Distinguishing Features of African American English

(from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006)

habitual *be* for intermittent activity:

e.g. *Sometimes my ears be itching.*

She don't be usually be there.

absence of copula for contracted forms of *is* and *are*:

e.g. *She nice.*

They acting all strange.

present tense, third-person -s absence:

e.g. *she walk* for *she walks*

she raise for *she raises*

possessive -s absence:

e.g. *man_ hat* for *man's hat*

Jack_ car for *Jack's car*

general plural -s absence:

e.g. *a lot of time* for *a lot of times*

some dog for *some dogs*

remote time stressed *béen* to mark a state or action that began a long time ago and is still relevant:

e.g. *You béen paid your dues a long time ago.*

I béen known him a long time.

simple past tense *had* + Verb:

e.g. *They had went outside and then they had messed up the yard.*

Yesterday, she had fixed the bike and had rode it to school.

ain't for *didn't*:

e.g. *He ain't go there yesterday.*

He ain't do it.

reduction of final consonant clusters when followed by a word beginning with a vowel:

e.g. *lif' up* for *lift up*

bus' up for *bust up*

skr for *str* initial clusters:

e.g. *skreet* for *street*

skraight for *straight*

use of [f] and [v] for final *th*:

e.g. *toof* for *tooth*

smooov for *smooth*

Even with this restricted list, there are important qualifications. In some cases, it is a particular aspect of the phonological or grammatical pattern rather than the general rule that is unique to AAE. Thus, consonant cluster reduction is widespread in English, but in most varieties it only applies when the cluster is followed by a consonant (e.g., *bes' kind*) rather than when followed by a vowel (*bes' en'*). Similarly, we also find plural -s absence in some Southern European

American varieties (Montgomery and Hall, 2004; Wolfram, 2003a), but only on quantified measure nouns (e.g., *four mile, five pound*). In other cases, the difference between the patterning of a feature in AAE and in a benchmark European American vernacular variety involves a significant quantitative difference rather than a qualitative one. For example, the absence of the verb *be* for contracted forms of *are* (e.g., *you ugly* for *you're ugly*) is found among Southern European American vernacular speakers, but it is not nearly as frequent as it is in AAE (Cukor-Avila, 2001; Wolfram, 1974).

Debate over the group-exclusiveness of some AAE structures continues despite careful study of the present status of AAE in relation to other varieties. Research by Bailey and Bassett (1986) and Montgomery and Mishoe (1999), for example, shows that finite *be* (e.g., *I be there; They be doing it*) is found in both European American and African American varieties, though its semantic reference is not identical. At the same time, other investigators have suggested that there are additional forms that are unique. For example, Labov (1998) suggests that among the constructions overlooked in earlier descriptions of AAE is resultative *be done*, a sequence of *be* and *done* together in sentences such as *If you love your enemy, they be done eat you alive in this society*; in these types of sentences it indicates a potential action or condition that will lead to some inevitable result.

There are also structures in AAE that appear on the surface to be very much like those in other dialects of English but turn out, upon closer inspection, to have uses or meanings that are unique. These types of structures are called *camouflaged forms* because they bear surface resemblance to constructions found in other varieties of English, but they are used differently. One of these camouflaged constructions is the form *come* in a construction with an -ing verb, as in *She come acting like she was real mad*. This structure looks like the common English use of the motion verb *come* in structures like *She came running*, but research indicates that it actually has a special use as a kind of verb auxiliary indicating annoyance or indignation on the part of the speaker (Spears, 1982). The specialized meaning of indignation is apparently unique to AAE. Other camouflaged forms include the progressive use of *steady* in *They be steady running* (Baugh, 1984), the use of *call oneself* with verb +ing constructions such as *They call themselves dancing* (Wolfram, 1994), and the use of *ain't* for *didn't* in *He ain't know nothing* (Labov et al., 1968).

Though it is possible to compare structures used by European American and African American speakers on an item-by-item basis, the picture that emerges from this approach does not fully represent the true relationship between AAE and other varieties. The uniqueness of AAE lies more in the particular combination of structures that make up the dialect than it does in a restricted set of potentially unique structures. It is the co-occurrence of grammatical structures such as the absence of various suffixes (possessive, third-person singular, plural -s), absence of copula *be*, use of habitual *be*, and so forth, along with a set of phonological characteristics such as consonant cluster reduction, final [f] for *th* (e.g., *baf* for *bath*), postvocalic *r*-lessness, and so forth,

that best defines the variety, rather than the subset of unique features. Studies of listener perceptions of ethnic identity certainly support the contention that AAE is distinct from comparable European American vernaculars, but researchers are still investigating how to sort out the precise points of this differentiation. Recent experimental investigation by Thomas and Reaser (forthcoming) suggests that phonetic differences rather than grammatical differences, including differences in vowel pronunciation and voice quality, may have as much to do with the perceptual determination of ethnicity as differences in grammatical structures.

Up to this point, we have discussed AAE as if it were a unitary variety in different regions of the United States. We must, however, admit regional variation in AAE, just as we have to admit regional variation within vernacular European American varieties. Certainly, some of the Northern metropolitan versions of AAE are distinguishable from some of the Southern rural versions, and South Atlantic coastal varieties are different from those found in the Gulf region. While admitting these regional variations, it is also important to point out that one of the most noteworthy aspects of AAE is the common set of features shared across different regions. Features such as habitual *be*, copula absence, inflectional *-s* absence, among a number of other grammatical and phonological structures, are found in locations as distant as Los Angeles, California; New Haven, Connecticut; Austin, Texas; and Meadville, Mississippi, cutting across both urban and rural settings. The foundation of a core set of AAE features, regardless of where it has been studied in the United States, attests to the strong ethnic association and trans-regional dimension of this language variety.

3 The Origin and Early Development of AAE

Hypotheses about the origin and early development of AAE have now gone through several paradigmatic shifts. Four primary hypotheses, in the following chronological sequence, have emerged over the past half century: the Anglicist Hypothesis, the Creolist Hypothesis, the Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis, and the Substrate Hypothesis. Controversy about these positions has not subsided, though most of the controversy now seems to be centered on the last two options.

The Anglicist Hypothesis was initially proposed by prominent American dialectologists such as Hans Kurath (1949) and Raven McDavid (McDavid and McDavid, 1951) in the mid-twentieth century, based on extensive surveys of regional English under the aegis of the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada. Though there were relatively few African Americans included in these surveys, it appeared that older black and white speakers interviewed in the 1930s and 1940s shared many of the same regional features. On this basis, American dialectologists concluded that AAE could be traced to the same sources as earlier European American dialects, the dialects of English spoken

in the British Isles. According to this historical scenario, slaves brought a number of different African languages with them when they were transported, but over the course of a couple of generations these were replaced by the English varieties spoken by their regional cohorts, with only a few minor traces of the ancestral languages remaining. As Kurath (1949: 6) put it, "By and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his education."

Under this viewpoint, differences between African American and European American varieties that could not be explained on the basis of regional and social factors were attributed to the preservation of earlier British dialect features. The pursuit of historical evidence to support this position involved the scrutiny of earlier English varieties in the British Isles for features similar to those found in AAE, along with a search for sociohistorical facts that would link speakers of these donor dialects with people of African descent in North America.

The Anglicist Hypothesis was the prevailing position on the origin of AAE until the mid-1960s and 1970s, when the Creolist Hypothesis emerged. According to this hypothesis, AAE developed from a creole language that was fairly widespread in the antebellum South (Bailey, 1965; Stewart, 1967, 1968; Dillard, 1972). This creole was not unique to the mainland South; it showed a number of similarities to well-known English-based creoles in the African diaspora, such as Krio, spoken today in Sierra Leone along the coast of West Africa, as well as English-based creoles of the Caribbean, such as those spoken in Barbados and Jamaica. Creolists maintain that the vestiges of the proto-creole that gave rise to AAE can be found in Gullah, the creole still spoken by some African Americans in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. It is maintained that this creole was fairly widespread among people of African descent on Southern plantations but was not spoken to any extent by whites. As Stewart (1968: 3) put it, "Negro slaves who constituted the field labor force on North American plantations up to the mid-nineteenth century, even many who were born in the New World spoke a variety of English which was in fact a true creole language – differing markedly in grammatical structure from those English dialects which were brought directly from Great Britain." Although not all AAE researchers accepted such a strong interpretation of the Creolist Hypothesis during the 1970s and 1980s, many accepted some version of it. As Fasold (1981: 164) noted, "the creole hypothesis seems most likely to be correct, but it is certainly not so well established as Dillard (1972), for example, would have us to believe."

Contact with other dialects in the US eventually led this creole language to be modified, according to the hypothesis, so that it became more closely aligned with other varieties of English in the process of decreolization, whereby creole features are gradually replaced by non-creole features. However, this process was neither instantaneous nor complete (Fasold, 1976), so that the vestiges of its creole predecessor may still be present in modern AAE. For example, copula absence (e.g., *You ugly*) is a well-known trait of creole languages, so one might

maintain that the present-day existence of copula absence in AAE is a vestige of its creole origin. Similar arguments have been made for various types of inflectional *-s* absence (e.g., *Mary go*; *Mary hat*) (Winford, 1997, 1998), as well as phonological characteristics such as consonant cluster reduction (Wolfram, Childs, and Torbert, 2000). Both the linguistic and social history of blacks in the antebellum South have been cited in support for the creole origin of AAE. J. L. Dillard's book *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (1972) was quite influential in promoting the Creolist Hypothesis, although current creolists (Rickford, 1999; Winford, 1997, 1998) have now engaged in much more rigorous and detailed quantitative analysis in support for this hypothesis than that originally offered by Dillard.

Several new types of data surfaced in the 1980s that called the Creolist Hypothesis into question. New written datasets included the written records of ex-slaves, such as the extensive set of ex-slave narratives collected under the Works Project Administration (WPA) (Bailey, Maynor, and Kukor-Avila, 1991; Schneider, 1989, 1996) in the 1930s; letters written by semiliterate ex-slaves in the mid-1800s (Montgomery and Fuller, 1996; Montgomery, Fuller, and DeMarse, 1993); and other specialized collections of texts, such as the Hyatt texts – an extensive set of interviews conducted with black practitioners of voodoo in the 1930s (Ewers, 1996; Hyatt, 1970–8). All of these records pointed toward the conclusion that earlier AAE was not nearly as distinct from postcolonial European American English varieties as would have been predicted under the Creolist Hypothesis. A limited set of audio recordings of ex-slaves conducted as a part of the WPA in the 1930s (Bailey et al., 1991) also seemed to support this contention.

A different type of data offered in opposition to the Creolist Hypothesis comes from the examination of the varieties of English spoken by black expatriates. For example, in the 1820s a group of blacks migrated from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to the peninsula of Samaná in the Dominican Republic, where their descendants continue to live in relative isolation and maintain a relic variety of English (Poplack and Sankoff, 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989, 1991, 2001). A significant population of African Americans also migrated from the United States to Canada in the early 1800s, and some of their descendants have preserved a life of relative isolation in Nova Scotia. The examination of the English varieties spoken by blacks in these areas by Poplack and Tagliamonte (Poplack, 1999; Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1991, 1994, 2001) indicates that these insular varieties were quite similar to earlier European American varieties rather than a presumed creole predecessor, thus casting doubt on the Creole Hypothesis.

Close scrutiny of the sociohistorical situation and demographics of the antebellum South (Mufwene, 1996, 2001) has indicated further that the distribution of slaves in the Southeastern Plantation region of the US was not particularly advantageous to the perpetuation of a widespread Plantation Creole, as had been postulated by earlier creolists. In fact, the vast majority of slaves lived on smaller farms with just a few slaves per household rather than on the large, sprawling

plantations with large numbers of slaves that are sometimes pictured in popular portrayals of the antebellum South. In fact, over 80 percent of all slaves were associated with families that had fewer than five slaves per household.

The Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis is like the Anglicist Hypothesis in maintaining that earlier, postcolonial African American speech was directly linked to the early British dialects brought to North America. However, the Neo-Anglicist position acknowledges that AAE has since diverged so that it is now quite distinct from contemporary European American vernacular speech. Poplack (1999: 27) asserts that "AAVE [African American Vernacular English] originated as English, but as the African American community solidified, it innovated specific features" so that "contemporary AAVE is the result of evolution, by its own unique, internal logic."

Disputes about the Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis center on the nature of the earlier language contact situation between Africans and Europeans and the general sociohistorical circumstances that framed the speech of earlier African Americans (Rickford, 1997, 1999; Singler, 1998a, 1998b; Winford, 1997, 1998). Research on long-term, historically isolated enclave communities of African Americans in coastal North Carolina (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002) and in Appalachia (Mallinson and Wolfram, 2002; Childs and Mallinson, forthcoming; Mallinson and Childs, forthcoming), for example, suggests that earlier African American speech in some regions converged to a large extent with localized varieties of English spoken by their European American counterparts. In this respect, the data appear to support the traditional Anglicist and Neo-Anglicist hypotheses. But there is also evidence for a durable ethnolinguistic divide that is not generally acknowledged under the Anglicist or Neo-Anglicist positions, giving rise to the Substrate Hypothesis (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002; Wolfram, 2003b). Some of the persistent differences may be attributed to subtle but enduring influence from early contact between Africans and Europeans. For example, structures vulnerable to modification and loss during language contact situations, such as inflectional *-s* on third-person verbs (e.g., *She go*), the copula (e.g., *He ugly*), and word-final consonant clusters (e.g., *lif' up* for *lift up*), distinguished earlier African American speech from that of its regional European American counterparts. Furthermore, these traits persist to this day, despite similarities across varieties with respect to other dialect features. In brief, the Substrate Hypothesis maintains that even though earlier AAE may have incorporated many regional dialect features, enduring substrate effects have consistently distinguished it from other varieties of American English (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002; Wolfram, 2003b). In this respect, the position differs from the Neo-Anglicist position, which argues that earlier AAE was identical to earlier European American English.

Current evidence suggests more regional influence from English speakers than assumed under the Creolist Hypothesis and more durable effects from early language contact situations than assumed under the Anglicist positions, but the issue of regional accommodation and substrate influence continues to be debated. Given the limitations of data, the different local circumstances

under which African Americans lived in the antebellum South, and the historical time-depth involved, there will probably always be speculation about the origin and earlier development of AAE.

4 The Development of Contemporary AAE

Questions about the present-day development of AAE have now become as controversial as its earlier history. Though it might be assumed that AAE has gradually been converging with other dialects of English in the century and a half since the Civil War, this view has been strongly challenged. Based on research conducted by Labov and his colleagues in Philadelphia in the mid-1980s (Labov, 1985, 1987; Labov and Harris, 1986) and Bailey and his colleagues (Bailey, 1987; Bailey and Maynor, 1987, 1989), it was concluded that AAE is actually diverging from rather than converging with surrounding vernaculars. As Labov (1985: 1) put it, "their [i.e., African American residents of Philadelphia] speech pattern is developing in its own direction and becoming more different from the speech of whites in the same communities." Studies of urban AAE in the last couple of decades seem to support the contention that some AAE structures are intensifying rather than receding and that new structures are developing (Bailey, 2001; Cukor-Avila, 2001; Dayton, 1996; Labov, 1998). For example, the use of habitual *be* in sentences such as *Sometimes they be playing games* seems to be escalating, to the point of becoming a stereotype of AAE. Similarly, the narrative use of the auxiliary *had* with a past or perfect form of the verb to indicate a simple past tense action, as in *They had went outside and then they had messed up the yard*, seems have arisen more recently and to be on the increase as well (Cukor-Avila, 2001; Rickford and Th  berge-Rafal, 1996; Ross, Oetting, and Stapleton, 2004).

The sociological foundation for the so-called divergence hypothesis was based on the social and economic plight of lower-class African Americans – racial isolation brought about by increasing de facto segregation and a widening socio-economic gap between mainstream American society and lower-class minority groups. Perhaps more important than population demographics, however, is the establishment of contemporary cultural and language norms related to African American youth culture that are in opposition to those found in mainstream white culture. The center of African American youth culture today is primarily urban, and many models for behavior, including language, seem to radiate outward from these urban cultural centers.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a couple of noteworthy sociolinguistic trends have taken place with respect to AAE. First, this variety has taken on an ethnic significance that transcends its regional context. There has also been a growing sense of ethnic identity associated with AAE over the past half-century. This sense of identity is bolstered through a variety of informal and formal social mechanisms that range from community-based social networks to stereotypical media projections of

African American speech (Lippi-Green, 1997). Part of what it means to speak AAE is not only the use of features associated with it, but the avoidance of features associated with regional and standard "white speech." Fordham and Ogbu (1986) note that the adoption of Standard English is at the top of the inventory of prominent behaviors listed by high school students as "acting white." Ethnic identity not only concerns the relations, behaviors, practices, and attitudes of African Americans themselves but also so-called oppositional identity – in other words, how African Americans position themselves with respect to white society.

The question of change in AAE has been addressed in recent years by examining a range of small, rural Southern communities (Carpenter and Hilliard, 2003; Childs and Mallinson, forthcoming; Cukor-Avila, 2001; Mallinson and Childs, forthcoming; Mallinson and Wolfram, 2002; Wolfram and Thomas, 2002) to complement the earlier study of AAE focused on large, urban non-Southern areas (Baugh, 1983; Fasold, 1972; Labov, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; Legum et al., 1971; Wolfram, 1969). Comparative studies of different small Southern communities show several different trajectories rather than a unitary path of change. In the case of one community, Hyde County, a historically isolated community of approximately 2,000 African American residents in coastal North Carolina, we find the movement of African American speech toward a more supra-regional norm (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002; Wolfram, 2003b). Elderly African Americans, who traveled little outside of the region, adopted many of the distinctive dialect traits of the European American dialect of the region while maintaining a core set of AAE features. Over time, however, core AAE features and local dialect features have shown a mirror image in terms of change. Older speakers show moderate levels of core AAE features and extensive local dialect accommodation, while younger speakers show a progressive increase in AAE features and a corresponding loss of local dialect structures. The trajectory of change with respect to the local, Outer Banks dialect features and the core AAE feature in the speech of African Americans of different generational groups in the area, based on our analysis of a number of representative features, is plotted in Figure 19.1 (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002: 200). Speakers are divided into generational groups based on four important sociohistorical periods: speakers who were born and raised in the early twentieth century up through World War I; speakers born and raised between World War I and school integration in the late 1960s; speakers who lived through the early period of school integration as adolescents; and speakers who were born and raised after legalized institutional integration.

From one perspective, the path of change indicated in Figure 19.1 reveals the limited linguistic effects of institutionally mandated integration. From a different vantage point, however, it indicates the growing consciousness of the role of language in the construction of ethnic identity, even in the face of sociopolitical pressure and legal mandates to integrate. Traditional rural dialects like those spoken on the coast of North Carolina now carry strong associations of white, rural speech. In fact, younger African Americans describe

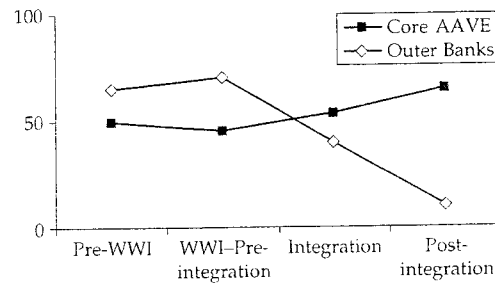


Figure 19.1 Trajectory of language change for African Americans in Hyde County (adapted from Wolfram and Thomas, 2002: 200)

the speech of older Hyde County African Americans as “sounding country” and being “more white” than the speech of younger African Americans. Younger speakers who identify strongly with African American culture contra “white culture” would therefore be inclined to change their speech toward the more generalized version of AAE – and away from the localized dialect norm. An essential ingredient of the contemporary supra-regional norm for AAE is thus the heightened symbolic role of language as an ethnic emblem of African American culture.

A quite different trajectory of change is indicated for a receding Appalachian African American community studied by Mallinson and Wolfram (2002), where only a half-dozen African American residents now remain from a once-stable community of 120 African Americans who lived there from the 1850s through the mid-twentieth century. In this case, we see the recession of core AAE features and the maintenance of the regional features of Appalachian speech. The trajectory of change for the Beech Bottom community is given in Figure 19.2.

A third type of change trajectory, a curvilinear model, is documented for another Southern Appalachian community, Texana (Childs and Mallinson, forthcoming; Mallinson and Childs, forthcoming), a small, stable African American community of approximately 150 African Americans which has existed in the Smoky Mountains for over 150 years. In this case, as shown in Figure 19.3, we see that younger and older speakers indicate relatively low levels of AAE features and high levels of local Appalachian features. At the same time, middle-aged speakers seem to increase their levels of AAE features.

Though middle-aged speakers show more AAE features than their younger and older cohorts, not all middle-aged speakers show this pattern. In fact, Mallinson and Childs (forthcoming) note that this pattern of intensification is restricted to those speakers who have spent time in metropolitan Atlanta, which is a couple of hours away from Texana. This pattern suggests the

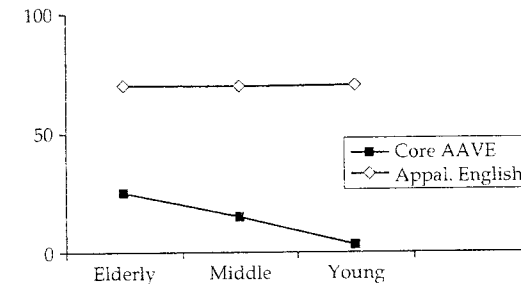


Figure 19.2 Trajectory of language change for Beech Bottom (based on Mallinson and Wolfram, 2002)

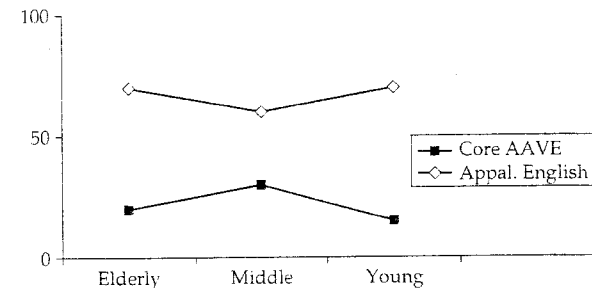


Figure 19.3 Trajectory of language change for Texana (based on Childs and Mallinson, forthcoming)

significance of contact with external, more urban African American populations. It also suggests that group affiliation and cultural orientation may be a factor in the determination of change in AAE, since Mallinson and Childs point to quite differing communities of practice and cultural orientations for middle-aged speakers who indicate more AAE structures.

The comparative study of different rural Southern African American communities shows that there may be alternative trajectories of change with respect to the use of core AAE structures and regional dialect structures, ranging from the intensification of AAE features and the corresponding loss of regionalized features, to the reduction of AAE features and the maintenance of regionalized features. Communities may also indicate a kind of ebb and flow in which core AAE features are intensified or reduced at different periods of time, or among different subgroups and/or individuals within a community.

Factors that affect trajectories of change include the regional setting of the community, community size, the past and present extent of ethnic isolation, significant macro and micro sociohistorical events, patterns of contact with external African American communities, intra-community social divisions, and cultural values within the community. Change in African American speech communities cannot be captured by a unilateral model. Instead, a variety of complex, intersecting factors needs to be considered in describing the present-day course of change in African American speech communities.

5 Conclusion

AAE is a distinct, robust, and stable socio-ethnic dialect of English that is maintaining itself and, in some cases, even intensifying. Though its origin and early development continue to be disputed, it seems apparent that AAE has accommodated itself to host regional varieties of English while maintaining a durable, distinctive substrate that has set it apart in the past and present. Furthermore, a growing sense of linguistic solidarity and identity among African Americans unifies AAE in different locales, though not all local situations follow the path of change. Comparisons of different local situations involving African Americans suggest considerable variation in patterns of change. Furthermore, these differing local situations underscore the significance of the social dynamics and the geographical location of a community in understanding the past and present development of AAE. Original settlement history, community size, local and extra-local social networks, and racial ideologies in American society must all be considered in understanding the course of change in African American speech.

Finally, we must note that AAE is more than a simple assemblage of linguistic structures of the type that we have described here. Linguists and dialectologists have sometimes focused on structural features of grammar and phonology to the exclusion of other traits that might distinguish speech communities. AAE may also encompass culturally significant uses of voice quality and other prosodic features, as well as culturally distinctive pragmatic features such as particular types of conversational routines that include greetings and leave-takings, back channeling, and narrative styles. The soul of AAE does not necessarily reside in the inventory of structural phonological and grammatical traits that have become the obsession of sociolinguistic description over the past few decades, but in its everyday uses of language that encompass the full range of communicative functions and activities.

See also Chapters 11, WEST AFRICAN ENGLISHES; 13, CARIBBEAN ENGLISHES; 15, WORLD ENGLISHES TODAY; 16, CONTACT LINGUISTICS AND WORLD ENGLISHES; 18, PIDGINS AND CREOLES; 21, SPEAKING AND WRITING IN WORLD ENGLISHES; 25, WORLD ENGLISHES AND CULTURE WARS; 36, TEACHING WORLD ENGLISHES.

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