

What Sounds “Black”: Undergraduates’ Perceptions of AAE

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Despite the fact that it is possible to identify African American speakers in the absence of visual cues (Baugh 1996, Niedzielski 1999, Purnell et al 1999, Tucker and Lambert 1969,) linguists have not yet determined by what means listeners can do this (Purnell et al 1999.) Phonological, phonetic, and physiological factors have been shown to be statistically insignificant in correlative measures of correct identification of African American speakers (Purnell et al 1999, Sapienza 1997,) yet there have been very few studies on the prosody of AAE (excepting Foreman 2000, Plichta forthcoming, Thomas forthcoming) and its possible role in speaker race identification.

This case study analyzes 16 undergraduate judge’ impressions of 8 speakers’ race via 45-minute taped interviews. Informants were drawn from a convenience sample of students enrolled in undergraduate Linguistics and English classes at the University of Georgia; mean age = 20, 50% African American, 50% white. Judges heard 8 speech samples (mean=16 seconds) taken from hour-long recorded conversations between pairs of African American women representing a continuum of styles within AAE; ages ranged from 19-62. Speakers were drawn from a convenience sample of colleagues and acquaintances at the university. Samples were chosen based on prosodic richness, race-neutral topic, and relative lack of stigmatized segmental features commonly associated with AAE (see Bailey 2001, and Cukor-Avila 2001.) Speakers’ race or identity was not disclosed, and pseudonyms were used. Interviews were aimed at distilling judges’ reasons for assessing speaker race as they did.

The range of data indicates that judges were able to convey the salient prosodic impressions they had of each speaker. The 8 most common prosodic features taken from these interviews were tabulated in order of decreasing frequency of mention: voice quality, intonation, rhythm, stress, vowel duration, inter-sentential pauses, syllable epenthesis, and vowel quality. Judges’ agreement on the presence of these features ranged from 33% - 100% with 75% of these features noted as present in at least 6 speakers’ samples 88% of the time. Accuracy in assessing speaker race was 88% overall. The results were not markedly different between the African American and White student judges. Accuracy in determining race differed only by 3% in favor of the White judges, and the saliency of features differed only in that African American judges indicated that vowel duration and quality as well as pauses within sentences were less salient for determining speaker race. The most noticeable discrepancy between the two groups of judges was qualitative in nature.

These results suggest that these undergraduate judges were able to pinpoint salient prosodic qualities present in African American-sounding speech with up to 100% agreement in the absence of stigmatized segmental features. These impressions correlate with quantifiable measurements such as phonation type, pitch contour, formant analysis, intensity, duration, and glottalization. This study suggests that prosodic qualities in speech can lead to correct identification of speaker race, adding to the pool of evidence about perception of race in speech, linguistic profiling, and the corpus of research on African American English.

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