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The Lost Community of the Outer Banks: African American Speech on Roanoke Island

The regional accommodation of earlier and contemporary African American speech remains one of the major issues in the debate over the development of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Recent studies of African American speech in isolated rural communities (e.g. Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Mallinson and Childs 2003) suggest that the accommodation of regional dialect norms by African American speakers coexisted with a common core of distinct ethnolinguistic traits in earlier African American English. Regionality and local dialect accommodation thus have taken on increased significance in the examination of the development of AAVE. This study considers a different but analogous regional situation with respect to African American speech—Roanoke Island on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Roanoke Island is well known as the site of the Lost Colony, where the first settlement of British colonists disappeared in 1585. The untold story of Roanoke Island, however, is its role in the development of Outer Banks African American speech.

Many of the approximately 200 current African American residents of Roanoke Island can trace their ancestry back to a Freedmen's Colony of over 3,000 African Americans established on the island during the Civil War. Following the forced disbanding of the Freedmen's Colony at the end of the Civil War, the African American population of Roanoke Island was reduced to approximately 300 residents. Now, in the face of an increasing, permanent white population (approximately 2,000) and thousands of tourists who inundate the island during the summer season, the African American community maintains strong intra-ethnic solidarity.

Participants in our study were chosen using community social networks and the family-tree social network model in which different members of extended families are selected for interviewing. In addition to these tape-recorded sociolinguistic interviews, data from a series of oral history interviews with members of the only all-black lifesaving crew on the Outer Banks allow us to extend our analysis to four generations of speakers.

The quantitative analysis of both traditional Outer Banks regional features (e.g. past tense *be* leveling to *weren't*, backing and raising of the nucleus in /ai/, front-gliding in /au/) and core diagnostic structures of AAVE (e.g. copula absence, third person singular *-s* absence, prevocalic consonant cluster reduction) allow us to determine patterns of local and supra-regional alignment over time.

The generational analysis indicates a pattern of increasingly regional accommodation with respect to more salient features (e.g. postvocalic rhoticity) rather than a movement toward the supra-regional AAVE norm found in Wolfram and Thomas (2002). However, the analysis of less salient features (e.g. prevocalic consonant cluster reduction) indicates a continued alignment with AAVE across the generations.

The mixed dialect alignment among Roanoke Island African Americans supports the conclusion that regional speech patterns can serve an important role in the

development of different varieties of AAVE. Furthermore, the unique configuration of dialect features on Roanoke Island as compared to other isolated rural settings indicates alternative trajectories of change in different regional settings, influenced by such factors as population size as well as local and extended inter-ethnic contact situation.

References

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