

Communities of Practice in Sociolinguistic Description: African American Women's Language in Appalachia

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Descriptions of African American women's language emphasize both the complex, dynamic nature of language use and the need to conduct locally situated ethnographic studies to examine diverse linguistic practices. The construct *community of practice* has been integral in providing a basis for focusing on the mutual construction of individual and community identity (Eckert 2000; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, 1998; Meyerhoff 2002), along with other social variables within the broad-based demographic category of African American women's speech. In this paper, we demonstrate how distinct ways of speaking and group identities are mutually constructed among women who share similar demographic profiles but exhibit different language practices.

The paper presents a study of variation in the speech of middle-aged and older women residents of Texana, North Carolina, a community of 153 African Americans situated in the Great Smoky Mountains of Appalachia. In general, the linguistic behavior of the community shows that most residents accommodate their language to the norms of the surrounding White Appalachian community (Childs and Mallinson 2003, Mallinson and Childs 2002), while at the same time maintaining linguistic variables associated with African American speech. Although the community indicates some shared dialect patterns, extensive subgroup variation also exists. This is best exemplified by considering two groups of four women residents who differ strikingly in terms of their linguistic behavior and social practices. The "porch sitters" consist of four middle-aged women, aged 39, 43, 46, and 57, who gather regularly on the front porch of the mobile home of one of the women for socializing and conversation, and to casually observe groups of men who gather across the street every night at a local hangout. The "church ladies," in contrast, represent four women, ages 49, 68, 70, and 72, who gather more formally – once a week, at the local church – to visit with each other and discuss devotional readings.

Using data collected from a series of interviews with these informants, we argue that the two groups of women represent distinct communities of practice and that the variable community of practice outweighs traditional demographic variables such as social status and age. The analysis of several diagnostic sociolinguistic variables (e.g., rhoticity, consonant cluster reduction, prevoiceless /ai/ ungliding, 3rd sg. – s absence, copula absence, and habitual *be*), as well as of specific lexical items and discourse strategies, reveals that the porch sitters have higher levels of characteristic African American English features. The church ladies, in contrast, exhibit higher levels of regional dialect features characteristic of varieties of Appalachian English. The analysis suggests that as these women interact within their communities of practice, they use language to transmit symbolic messages about themselves to others and thereby construct social identities for themselves and for their group.

References

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