

A FIRST LOOK AT RHYTHM IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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In recent years, stress timing and syllable timing have come to be seen as poles on a continuum of rhythm types, not as absolutes. The development of the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) formula by Low and Grabe (1995) provided a method for examining the degree of stress timing and syllable timing in speech samples. PVI has been applied to dialects of English as well as to cross-linguistic comparisons. Most dialectal studies have focused on dialects with substrate language influence, including Singapore English and California Chicano English. The present study applies PVI to a comparison of African American and European American speech in one section of the South. It thus may open a new line of inquiry on two major questions concerning the various forms of African American English (AAE), the questions of their origin and of their continuing development relative to European American dialects.

Conversational interviews of African Americans and European Americans from three rural communities in eastern North Carolina—one each along the coast and the Virginia and South Carolina borders—were analyzed for PVI. These interviews were part of ethnographic surveys and largely represent vernacular speech. Samples of both older speakers and younger speakers from the two ethnicities were included in each community. Samples of English spoken by Hispanics whose first language is Spanish from two North Carolina communities were included as controls. The latter represent a recent wave of immigrants into North Carolina. Spanish is traditionally considered a syllable-timed language, while English is considered stress-timed. PVI involves comparison of acoustic measurements of the durations of syllabic portions of adjacent syllables. At least 300 syllable pair comparisons were made for each speaker, with mean and median values of all comparisons for a given speaker computed. Pre-pausal syllables were not included in order to control for pre-pausal lengthening, but other factors that affect duration of vocoids were assumed to be mitigated by the large number of PVI comparisons.

As expected, the results showed that the Hispanic control speakers showed a greater degree of syllable timing than the African Americans and European Americans. African Americans and European Americans, however, showed far less differentiation from each other in PVI. Because Caribbean Creoles are usually considered to be syllable-timed, the robust stress timing pattern found in the AAE samples would seem to disfavor a Creole origin for AAE rhythm. Such a conclusion is too hasty, though, not only because of the possibility of decreolization but also because other prosodic factors that differ between African Americans and European Americans may have created a spurious similarity. African Americans show more intonational pitch accents, which generally increase PVI, than European Americans. Older European Americans, however, show more influence of the “Southern Drawl,” the prolongation of certain syllables, which can also raise PVI. The results thus offer no clear evidence for either a Creole origin of AAE or a British origin. Nevertheless, stress timing, though it may be

influenced by intonation, represents a point of convergence between contemporary AAE and European American varieties.

Low, Ee Ling, and Esther Grabe. 1995. Prosodic patterns in Singapore English. In: *Proceedings of The XIIIth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, vol. 3, ed. Kjell Elenius and Peter Branderud. Stockholm: KTH & Stockholm University. 636-39.

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