

Trajectories of Change in African American Vernacular English: Comparative Evidence from Isolated African American Communities

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Two major controversies have marked the sociolinguistic investigation of AAVE over the past half-century: the “origins controversy” and “the change controversy.” Questions about its genesis are likely to remain in dispute because of the limitations of historical data, but questions about its post-Civil War development can be addressed by examining language change in apparent time. One instructive type of situation for examining change in the twentieth century is the long-term, historically insular community. On this basis, for example, Wolfram and Thomas (2002) conclude that earlier African American speech was more regionally aligned, but has since been supplanted by a supra-regional AAVE norm. How generalizable is this observation? What are the primary factors affecting change in such situations, and what is the role of the individual speaker?

The study compares data from four different historically isolated communities investigated by the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project, including: (1) Roanoke Island, a longstanding African American Outer Banks island community of approximately 200 residents whose ancestors predate a Freedman’s colony of more than 3,000 African American residents established on the island during the Civil War (Carpenter and Hilliard (2003); (2) Hyde County, an isolated coastal community of approximately 2,000 African American who have inhabited the region since the early 1700s (Wolfram and Thomas 2002); (3) Beech Bottom, a receding African American community of a half dozen residents in Appalachia established in the early 1800s (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002); and (4) Texana, an African American community of approximately 150 residents established in the Smoky Mountains in the mid-1800s (Childs and Mallinson 2003; Mallinson and Childs 2003). Variables such as prevocalic consonant cluster reduction, postvocalic rhoticity, vowel production, copula absence, 3rd pl. –s marking, 3rd sg. –s absence, and past tense *be* regularization have been examined quantitatively for each of these communities to determine their change in apparent time.

The results indicate the existence of alternative trajectories of change rather than a unitary path of development. Hyde County shows movement toward a supra-regional norm, but Beech Bottom and Roanoke Island show change toward more regional alignment, and Texana shows a curvilinear path of change in which middle-aged speakers who maintain ties with a large urban area (Atlanta) move toward a supra-regional AAVE norm. Even individual isolates show different patterns of local dialect alignment, so that the only African American resident of Ocracoke, born in 1904, maintains a strong set of AAVE structures (Wolfram, Hazen, and Tamburro 1997) whereas the lone teenager in Beech Bottom, born in 1988, accommodates local regional dialect features *en toto*.

The comparison cautions against the conclusion that AAVE has followed a unilateral path of development. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of regionality in the past and present development of AAVE. Explanations for divergent trajectories of change must appeal to original settlement history, community size and social networks, contact with external African American communities and cohort European American communities, and past and present racial ideologies in American society.

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