

Ethnic Identity and Past *Be* Configuration in the Lumbee Community of Baltimore, Maryland

by

Kathleen Williams, PhD Candidate, Dept. of Linguistics, Georgetown University

The existence of an English dialect specific to the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, North Carolina, has been well documented. In the tri-ethnic environment in which this dialect is spoken (38% Lumbee, 33% Anglo-American, and 25% African American), variationists have isolated phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic features that distinguish the speech of the Lumbee from that of the two other major ethnic groups in Robeson County (Dannenberg 2002; Wolfram 1996; Wolfram and Dannenberg 1999; Wolfram and Sellers 1999; Wolfram Dannenberg, Knick, and Oxendine 2002). Moreover, these studies all focus on the connection between the persistence of a unique Lumbee dialect and the group's efforts to maintain a separate identity from the African American and Anglo-American communities with which it coexists. In addition, in the absence of any documented ancestral language, Lumbee English has become emblematic of the group's ongoing struggle to gain full Federal recognition as a Native American tribe.

The current study presents the first sociolinguistic analysis of the Lumbee community in Baltimore, Maryland. This community was founded by Lumbee who migrated from Robeson County and is still characterized by strong ties to the Robeson County Lumbee. The community is cohesive and clearly geographically demarcated (Globensky, 1999; Makofsky 1971; Peck 1969), despite the fact that estimates of the number of Lumbee living in the Baltimore area vary widely, from 2000 to 5000, and many Lumbee have moved from Baltimore City to surrounding counties in recent decades. The present study is based on sociohistorical and ethnographic research, as well as sociolinguistic interviews with three generations of Baltimore Lumbee. The paper presents a qualitative discussion of the Baltimore Lumbee dialect, as well as preliminary quantitative analysis of one feature found to be distinctive in Robeson County Lumbee English -- the leveling of negative past *be* to *weren't*, as in *I weren't home* or *He weren't very nice*. This feature is used to a greater extent among the Robeson County Lumbee than among neighboring Whites and in addition shows different patterning according to linguistic constraints when compared with its use among Robeson County Blacks (Wolfram and Sellers 1999). The current study suggests that leveling to *weren't* is also a distinguishing feature of Baltimore Lumbee English but that it follows different linguistic constraints than in Robeson County Lumbee English. Moreover, an examination of its cross-generational patterning suggests that it may be fading from use. This recession of traditional Lumbee dialect features in Baltimore seems to be due in part to the influence of surrounding varieties but also to the diminishing importance of dialect in expressing ethnic distinctiveness vis-à-vis other markers of uniqueness. These include events that celebrate Native American culture, such as annual powwows, and several Lumbee institutions that play a central role in community cohesiveness, including the South Broadway Baptist Church and the Baltimore American Indian Center. The paper thus contributes to our understanding of not only Lumbee English but also the importance (or lack thereof) of language and dialect in expressing and shaping ethnic identity more generally.

References

- Dannenberg, Clare J. (2002). *Sociolinguistic constructs of ethnic identity: The syntactic delineation of an American Indian English*. Publication of the American Dialect Society. No. 87. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fought, Carmen (2004). Ethnicity. In J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes (eds.), *The handbook of language variation and change*. Oxford: Blackwell. 444-72.
- Giles, Howard (1979). Ethnicity markers in speech. In K. Scherer and H. Giles (eds.), *Social markers in speech*. London: Cambridge University Press. 251-89.
- Globensky, Anne Brigid (1999). *At home in Baltimore: An ethnographic approach to the study of Lumbee domestic material culture*. [PhD Dissertation, The University of Maryland.] Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Makofsky, Abraham (1971). *Tradition and change in the Lumbee Indian community of Baltimore*. [PhD Dissertation, The Catholic University of America.] Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, A XEROX Company.
- Peck, John Gregory (1969). Lumbee Indians in Baltimore. *The National Study of American Indian Education*. Series II. No. 3. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Office of Education.
- Wolfram, Walt (1996). Delineation and description in dialectology: The case of perfective *I'm* in Lumbee English. *American Speech* 71: 5-26.
- Wolfram, Walt, and Clare Dannenberg (1999). Dialect identity in a tri-ethnic context: The case of Lumbee American Indian English. *English World Wide* 20: 179-216.
- Wolfram, Walt, Clare Dannenberg, Stanley Knick and Linda Oxendine (2002). *Fine in the world: Lumbee language in time and place*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University Humanities Extension/ Publications.
- Wolfram, Walt, and Jason Sellers (1999). Ethnolinguistic marking of past *be* in Lumbee Vernacular English. *Journal of English Linguistics* 27: 94-114.