

The Diffusion of Language from Group to Group

The preceding chapter dealt with the diffusion of linguistic structures from place to place. The speech communities described so far – New York, Albany, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St Louis – are formed by the population defined in American society as the white mainstream. They are geographical unities, differentiated internally by social class, but separated sharply from the African–American and Latino populations in the same cities. Most American cities include three major communal groups, in the sense defined in Blanc’s 1964 study of communal dialects of Baghdad (in that case, Jewish, Christian and Muslim). Since contacts between such communal groups are primarily among adults, we can expect the same loss of structure that was observed in geographic diffusion when linguistic patterns spread from one group to the other.

16.1 Diffusion to the AAVE Community

We can begin this inquiry with a general review of studies of the influence of surrounding dialects on African–American Vernacular English (AAVE). While the speech of African–Americans in the United States covers a wide range of grammatical and phonological features that may be called “African–American English,” the specific dialect designated AAVE refers to the geographically uniform grammar found in low-income areas of high residential segregation. Baugh (1983) defines AAVE as the speech of African–Americans who live with, work with and speak with other African–Americans. There is considerable phonological variation within AAVE (Myhill 1988). The uniformity mentioned here refers to the nation-wide uniformity of AAVE grammar: primarily, to its morphosyntactic and morphological features and to the tense/mood/aspect system (for NYC, see Labov et al. 1968, Labov 1972, Labov 1998; for Washington, see Fasold 1972; for Los Angeles, see Baugh 1983; for Philadelphia, see Labov and Harris 1986, Ash and Myhill 1986; for Bay Area, see Mitchell–Kernan 1969, Rickford et al. 1991, Rickford 1999, Rickford and Rafal 1996; for Texas, see Bailey 1993, Cukor-Avila 1995). Undoubtedly some regional

Table 16.1 Indices of dominance for five ethnic groups in Philadelphia, from 1850 to 1970 (proportion of a person's census tract that consists of the same group)

	1850	1880	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Blacks	11	12	35	45	56	72	74
Irish		34	8			5	3
German	25	11	5	3			
Italian		38				23	21
Polish		20				9	8

Source: T. Hershberg, A tale of three cities: Black, immigrants and opportunity in Philadelphia, 1850–1880, 1930, 1970. In T. Hershberg (ed.), *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 461–95, Table 8

variation will eventually be found in AAVE grammar, but so far only small quantitative differences have been reported. The national uniformity of AAVE grammar remains a mystery to be solved, which goes beyond the scope of this volume.

The various studies of the pronunciation of African–American English carried out since 1964 offer an opportunity to examine the process of diffusion across communal groups that inhabit the same cities but are separated from each other by sharp residential boundaries. While residential segregation for most ethnic groups declines over time in the US, segregation of blacks and whites has undergone a steady increase up to the very high degree reached in the 1980s and has remained stable ever since (Hershberg 1981, Massey and Denton 1993). Table 16.1 shows this progression for the index of dominance in Philadelphia. While the Irish, German, Italian and Polish groups show a regular decrease in segregation, the African–American group rises steadily across the decades. Residential segregation is the primary condition responsible for the recent divergence of AAVE from other dialects, as is seen in the exponential rise in features such as habitual *be*, or in the use of *had* to mark the simple preterit (Bailey 1993, 2001; Labov and Harris 1986).

Given this high level of residential segregation, we can expect to find minimal effects of surrounding dialects in studies of AAVE. On the other hand, one can expect greater effects of surrounding groups in studies of the speech of African–American university students and their friends.

16.2 Influence of Surrounding Dialects on AAVE Pronunciation

The studies of adolescent speakers of AAVE in South Harlem showed no participation in the vowel shifts characteristic of the white NYC community (Labov et al.

1968, Labov 1972). This is equally true of the African–American adults interviewed in Harlem and of the African–American subjects in the Lower East Side study (Labov 1966, Ch. 8).¹ Studies of AAVE in West Philadelphia (Labov and Harris 1986) found no trace of Philadelphia sound changes in the speech of members of the core social networks.² However, AAVE speakers generally reflect the level of *r*-pronunciation in the surrounding dialects. In New York City, AAVE speakers show the same consistent vocalization of coda /r/ as the *r*-less white dialect, but they also extend this pattern to include ambi-syllabic /r/ (Labov et al. 1968, Labov 1972). In basically *r*-ful Philadelphia, AAVE use of the variable (r) fluctuates around 50 percent (Myhill 1988).

A moderate raising of /æ/ along the nonperipheral track to [æ.] or to [ɛ^ɰ] is characteristic of the less focused varieties of African–American English as well as of AAVE. Gordon (2000) found this moderate raising of /æ/ among African–American college girls near Chicago. Jones (2003) looked closely at the realization of /æ/ in the African–American community in Lansing and found some raising to the level of short *e* and above, especially among women and older speakers (see also Jones and Preston in press).

Purnell (2008) analyzed the word lists pronounced by nine African–American students from Southeastern Wisconsin, an area in which the Northern Cities Shift is active, but which is differentiated from other Inland North regions by the raising of /æ/ before /g/ – often to the point of merger of /æg/ and /eyg/ (Zeller 1997, ANAE, Ch. 13). For at least two female speakers, Purnell found evidence of the raising of /æ/ before /g/ with the front upglide that marks merger with /ey/.

Eberhardt (2008) examined the low back merger of /o/ and /oh/ among African–Americans in Pittsburgh, where it has been complete among the mainstream white population for over a century. Only three of the thirty-four African–Americans made a distinction in the production of minimal pairs, and these were among the oldest subjects.

These studies all indicate a certain influence of the dialect of the surrounding area on the phonetic output of African–Americans, especially for the relatively small number of adults who have extensive contacts with the white community. As we will see below, such contacts and such dialect influence are not characteristic of children in their formative years. It is unsurprising that adults can absorb and transmit such phonetic features, just as local lexicon is diffused throughout the speech community. African–Americans in Philadelphia ask for a *hoagie* rather than a *sub*, walk on the *pavement* rather than the *sidewalk*, and use the exclamation “Yo!” like everyone else in the city. We are primarily interested here in the diffusion of such complex linguistic structures as the NYC short-*a* pattern and the Northern Cities Shift, as discussed in the geographic diffusion of Chapter 14.

DIFFUSION OF THE PHILADELPHIA SHORT-*a* PATTERN TO THE AFRICAN–AMERICAN COMMUNITY The Philadelphia short-*a* split into lax /æ/ and tense /æh/ has been

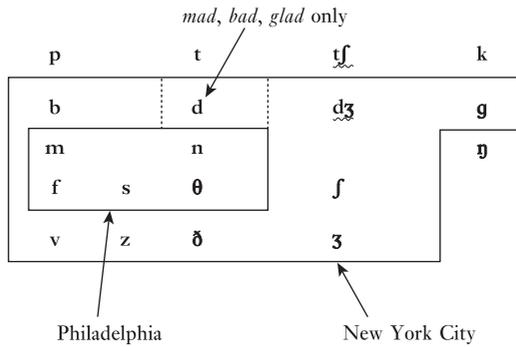


Figure 16.1 Coda consonants determining tense vowels in checked syllables in Philadelphia and New York City

described in considerable detail (Ferguson 1975, Labov 1989b, ANAE, Ch. 13) and has been a focus of attention at many points in the two preceding volumes (see in particular PLC, Vol. 1: 534–7). Figure 16.1 shows the conditioning environments in which closed syllables are tensed in New York City and in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia consonants are a proper subset of the NYC consonants, excluding voiced fricatives and voiced stops except for *mad, bad* and *glad*, and excluding all back consonants (specifically /ʃ/). Of the eight additional conditions found in New York City, all but the tensing of *avenue* apply to Philadelphia as well. The Philadelphia system includes two further modifications: (1) the constraint that function words ending in nasals are lax (*can, am, and*) is extended to include three irregular verbs: *ran, swam, began*;³ and (2) there is lexical diffusion in open syllables, with the most tensing in the word *planet*.⁴

Henderson (1996) studied the short-*a* pattern of thirty African–American speakers from Philadelphia; the results are shown in Table 16.2, along with the percentages for the 100 white speakers reported in Labov (1989b). For the normally tense classes, the white Philadelphians are close to 100 percent. African–Americans use equivalent tensing before nasals; come close for the *mad, bad, glad* sub-class; but fall considerably short for tensing before voiceless fricatives in *path, bath, pass*, etc., with only 69 percent.

White Philadelphians do not generally tense short-*a* in open syllables; before nasals a small number of particular words like *planet* are tensed, amounting to less than 1%. The open syllable constraint before nasals is much weaker among African–Americans; almost half of the tokens are tense. Finally, the grammatical constraint that laxes irregular verbs ending in nasals (*ran, swam, began*) is quite weakly diffused to the African–American community: 71 percent of these verbs are tense, in comparison with only 19 percent among white Philadelphians.

Table 16.2 Tensing of short *a* for whites and African–Americans in Philadelphia

Following segment	Euro-Americans (Labov 1989b) % tense	African–Americans (Henderson 1996) % tense
Normally tense in white Philadelphia dialect		
before nasal coda	96	95
before voiceless fricatives	98	69
<i>mad, bad, glad</i>	99	83
Normally lax in white Philadelphia dialect		
before intervocalic nasals	01	43
<i>ran, swam, began</i>	19	71

There is no doubt that the short-*a* pattern of African–Americans in Philadelphia reflects the influence of the surrounding white community. It is not, however, a true copy; that is, it does not appear to be the result of the faithful transmission of the system across generations of child language learners. The diffusion of the short-*a* pattern across communal lines appears to be the work of adults, with loss of detail typical of adult language learning. This will become more evident when we consider the diffusion of grammatical features across communal lines in the second half of this chapter.

DIFFUSION OF THE NORTHERN CITIES SHIFT ACROSS COMMUNAL GROUPS The studies of African–American English in the North, cited above, were not only looking for phonetic influence of white on black speech in Lansing, Chicago and Milwaukee. In one way or another, they all addressed the question of whether African–Americans were participating in the Northern Cities Shift – the systematic rotation of six English vowels. The Jones and Purnell reports showed some evidence of regional influence on the realization of short *a*. But no further indication of the diffusion of the Northern Cities Shift appears in their data. Jones presents two vowel systems in full: instead of a general raising to mid position, both systems show a continuous short-*a* pattern, with the low front position fully occupied by /æ/ before voiceless stops (Jones 2003: Figures 4.4, 4.6). Short *o* shows no signs of moving forward, and short *e* shows no signs of moving back. Instead, the short-*a* tokens that are raised to lower mid position before voiced fricatives and voiced stops show considerable overlap with tokens of short *e*. All of the Purnell vowel charts show the low front position fully occupied with some tokens of /æ/, and none shows the characteristic vowel shifts that respond to the absence of vowels in this position.

Even though these are small studies, they are focused on just those African–American speakers who are most likely to show the effects of the surrounding white dialect: university students and friends of university students. But in Jones' work,

which reached out further into the black community, there was no significant difference in raising that could be attributed to the social networks of the speakers – whether these networks were highly focused in the black community or showed wider contacts in the white community (Jones 2003: 119). It therefore seems likely that these limited phonetic effects are typical of the wider influence on the black community as a whole. They are less systematic than the diffusion of the Northern Cities Shift to St Louis, examined in the last chapter.

Preston (2010) brings together a variety of studies of the adaptation of the NCS in the vowel systems of minority groups: African-Americans, Arab-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Polish-Americans. All of these systems show a phonetic approximation of the F1/F2 positions in the following long-short pairs:

/ey/ ~ /i/
 /æh/ ~ /e/
 /ow/ ~ /u/
 /oh/ ~ /ʌ/

The partial influence of the Northern Cities Shift can be seen as follows:

- a The first stage of the NCS is reflected in the tensing and lengthening of /æ/ to /æh/, but /æh/ is not fronted or raised beyond /e/; it remains to be demonstrated whether length consistently differentiates these pairs.
- b The tendency to lower and back /i/ shown in the final stages of the NCS, along with the general upper mid peripheral position of /ey/ in the North, brings /i/ to the same height as /ey/, but makes it distinctively backer.
- c /ʌ/ is not strongly backed, as in the later stages of the NCS, and /oh/ remains in lower mid position, forming the /ʌ/ ~ /oh/ pair.

These convergent phonetic tendencies illustrate again the nature of the phonetic changes common to diffusion, in the perspective outlined by Dinkin in the last chapter. These pairings are not at the abstract level of the morphophonemic alternations of *sane* ~ *sanity*, or *ferocious* ~ *ferocity*, but they show instead the regularization of phonemic targets at the most superficial phonetic level.

16.3 The Diffusion of Constraints on *-t, d* Deletion to Children in Minority Communities

Among the more intricate systems of linguistic variation, considerable attention has been given to the constraints on English consonant cluster simplification, or *-t, d* deletion. The first examination of internal constraints on a linguistic variable was carried out for the pre-adolescent Thunderbirds and adolescent Jets and Cobras in

South Harlem (Labov et al. 1965; Labov et al. 1968; Labov 1972). The basic constraints were found to be the favoring of retention by the feature of sonority and the grammatical status of the following segment. These were confirmed and elaborated in the studies of AAVE that followed (Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972; Baugh 1983). The LCV study of Philadelphia in the 1970s expanded this view of constraints on *-t, d* deletion to white speakers, who were found to follow the same pattern of deletion as African-Americans at a lower frequency, except for a very strong constraint of following pause (Guy 1980). Since then, this general pattern has been confirmed for many communities throughout the English speaking world.

The same constraints have been found for second and third generation speakers of Latino English, with some exceptions (Wolfram 1974). The cluster /rd/ is never simplified in mainstream dialects, but small percentages of deletion have been recorded in several studies of Latino English (Cofer 1972, Santa Ana 1991). This can be accounted for by the hypothesis that /r/ is phonologically a glide in English with the features [-consonantal, -vocalic], but inherits its Spanish phonological status as a resonant [+consonantal, +vocalic] in Latino English. It has also been found that the favoring of deletion in unstressed syllables is absent in Latino English (Santa Ana 1996), possibly the effect of syllable timing in the substrate language.

The major thesis of this chapter is that language features are diffused across highly segregated communal groups by adults, and that such changes reach children only indirectly. In the case of *-t, d* deletion, it appears that a high degree of convergence of black and white speech communities has been reached for some time, but we would not expect such convergence in the more recently developing English of Spanish-dominant children. This is the typical result of first-language interference and the universal effects of articulatory factors, without precise matching to specific norms of the matrix community. For English-dominant Latino children, we might observe the emergence of a community norm more influenced by a general pattern of interaction with adults, including parents and teachers.

One opportunity for examining such a result is found in the work of the Urban Minorities Reading Project (UMRP). This project was designed to test the effect of an Individualized Reading Program on the reading levels of elementary school children in Philadelphia, Atlanta and California (Labov 2003, Labov and Baker in press). Subjects were drawn from four language/ethnic groups: whites (W), African-Americans (A), Latinos who had learned to read in English first (E) and Latinos who had learned to read in Spanish first (S). All schools were in low income areas, where at least 65 percent of the students qualified for the federal free lunch program. Students were selected for the program if they were one or two years behind in reading grade level, or below the 35th percentile in the standardized Woodcock-Johnson Word Attack or Word Identification test. In the first year of the project we recorded the spontaneous speech of 700 students age 8–11, in the second, third and fourth grade. A selection of 397 of the interviews were transcribed and coded for phonological and grammatical variables relevant to AAVE. The selection was randomized by language/ethnic group and section of the country.

Interviewers were researchers/tutors who were practiced in techniques of eliciting spontaneous speech from children of this age. A sample transcription is given in (1):

- (1) IVr: Did you ever get into a fight with a kid bigger than you?
 P05-001: Oh yeah. (sucks teeth) but my sister jumped 111 in it.
 IVr: What happened, how did it start?
 P05-001: (sucks lips) Well, I was at – I was at – I was like, at my grandma’s 211 house, and I went 111 back home, cuz my mom, we was, me and Sabrina was here, and then I went 110 back home. And I said, “Sabrina, you got a rope that we can play with?” Sinquetta and ’nem, she said – and I said = – and she had said “Yeah, so then Sinquetta and them had to go back in the house, la, la, la, blah, blah, then some other big girl. I was – we was playin’ rope right, (sucks lips), then she gon jump in and she say 230 “You might jump better, and not be ’flicted 811.” I said “It’s not going to be ‘flicted, cuz I know how to turn.” She said, and then she only got up to ten. She was mad at me, and she had hit me, so I hit her right back. Sabrina jumped 111 in it. And start 81 hittin’ her. I was just 110 lookin. I was just 110 lookin’

Each phonological and grammatical variable was coded with two-to-three-digit codes inserted in the text immediately after the relevant word. These are extracted automatically by the DX program, which reads from the orthography the phonetic structure of clusters, the segmental environment and the grammatical status of clusters, and outputs files for a Varbul analysis. A few of the numerical codes relevant to the present discussion are retained in the sample passage (2):

- (2) 111: A coronal complex coda with final /t, d/ retained: *jumped in*.
 110: A coronal complex coda with final /t, d/ deleted: *went back, just lookin’*
 811: Regular -ed retained after verbal coronal cluster: *be ’flicted*
 80: Regular -ed absent after single /t, d/: *start*
 211: Possessive {s} present: *grandma’s house*
 230: Verbal {s} absent *she say*.

To give some idea of the volume of consonant clusters generated in these transcriptions, Table 16.3 displays the numbers of tokens of the (t, d) variable by grammatical status and language/ethnic group.

Consonant cluster simplification is common to all speakers of English, at varying levels of frequency. In our population of struggling readers, this varies from 28 percent (whites in California) to 64 percent (Latinos (Spanish) in Atlanta). Figure 16.2 shows that, throughout, whites operate at the lowest levels of -t, d deletion and Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first at the highest – somewhat higher everywhere than African-Americans. On the other hand, Latinos who

Table 16.3 Numbers of tokens of (t, d) clusters by language/ethnic group and grammatical status in the coded transcriptions of 397 UMRP subjects. A = African–American [N = 112]; W = white [N = 105]; E = Latinos who learned to read in English first [N = 86]; S = Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first [N = 94]

	A	W	E	S	Total
Derivational	683	600	399	363	2,045
Monomorphemic	1,531	1,723	986	899	5,139
Past	718	815	487	332	2,352
Total	2,932	3,138	1,872	1,594	9,536

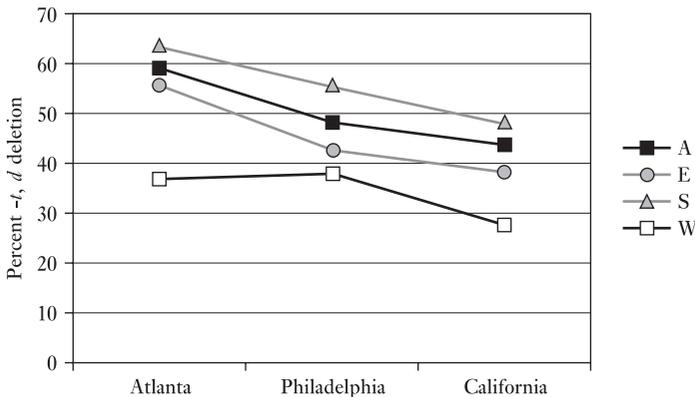


Figure 16.2 Overall frequencies of *-t, d* deletion by language/ethnic group and region for 397 struggling readers (abbreviations as in Table 16.3)

learned to read in English first are intermediate between African–Americans and whites.

When we examine the internal constraints on this process, a radically different picture emerges. The tendency to simplify consonant clusters springs from two distinct sources. There are general constraints on articulatory execution, which is controlled by the sonority of the following segment and by feature combinations with the preceding segment. On the other hand, there are constraints specific to English: the effects of the grammatical status of the cluster and voicing of the final segment. There is no evidence for the universality of these effects,⁵ and they are most likely transmitted to the language learner from intimate contact with native speakers.

Table 16.4 presents in the first column the overall analysis of the data set, with social and regional factor groups, followed by runs for each of the four language/ethnic groups considered separately.

Table 16.4 Analysis by logistic regression of (t, d) deletion in the spontaneous speech of 397 UMRP subjects by language/ethnic groups (abbreviations as in Table 16.3)

	All	A	S	E	W
Preceding segment					
sibilant	0.64	0.64	0.74	0.61	0.61
nasal	0.52	0.53	0.39	0.54	0.57
stop	0.41	0.44	0.50	0.36	0.41
other fricative	0.39	0.37	0.47	0.36	0.31
labial	0.33	0.27	0.47	0.40	0.22
Consonants preceding					
2	0.60	0.68			0.66
1	0.49	0.48			0.49
Grammatical status					
derivational	0.61	0.67			0.69
monomorphemic	0.53	0.56			0.54
preterit	0.35	0.24			0.29
Cluster voicing					
voiceless	0.59	0.58		0.63	0.61
voiced	0.42	0.42		0.38	0.40
Voicing agreement					
homovoiced	0.59	0.64		0.60	0.58
heterovoiced	0.18	0.09		0.16	0.19
Following segment					
lateral	0.72	0.76	0.67	0.77	0.69
nasal	0.71	0.72	0.69	0.66	0.77
/w/	0.59	0.62	0.60	0.49	0.66
stop	0.65	0.59	0.62	0.71	0.68
fricative	0.59	0.60	0.49	0.58	0.68
/r/	0.54	0.59	0.56	0.55	0.49
pause	0.44	0.46	0.49	0.41	0.40
/h/	0.43	0.44	0.38	0.49	0.38
vowel	0.38	0.37	0.40	0.37	0.37
/y/	0.33	0.42	0.36	0.59	0.15
Context					
Spontaneous speech	0.51	0.51	0.51		0.51
Story retelling	0.42	0.42	0.42		0.42
Region					
Philadelphia	0.56	0.55	0.59	0.54	0.58
Atlanta	0.53	0.52	0.49	0.60	0.48
California	0.41	0.44	0.41	0.40	0.43
Grade					
2	0.52			0.47	
3	0.51			0.54	
4	0.48			0.44	

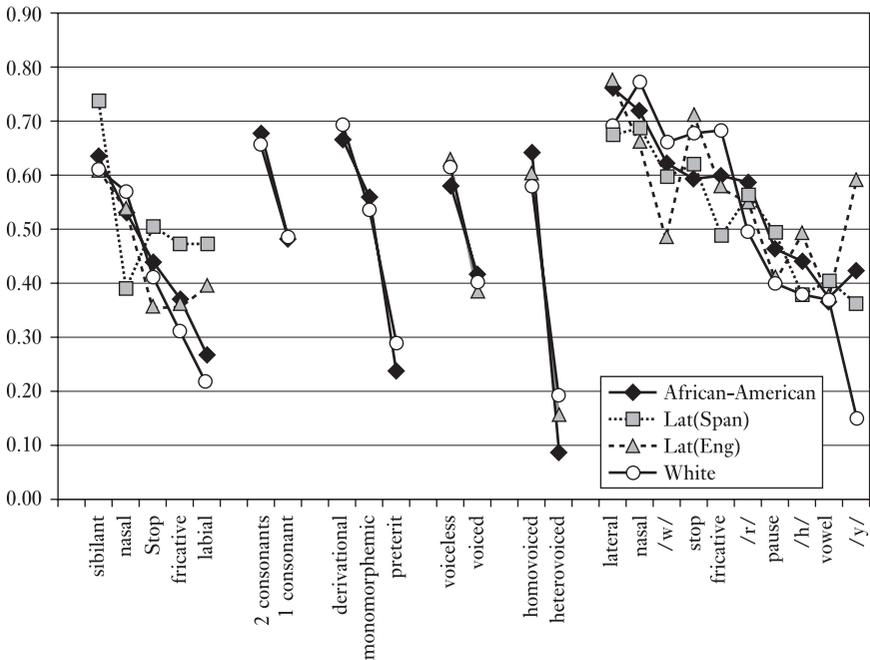


Figure 16.3 Varbrul weights governing /t, d/ deletion by language/ethnic groups in elementary schools (abbreviations as in Table 16.3)

The relations of the significant factor groups in Table 16.4 are displayed in Figure 16.3. The effects of preceding and following segments appear at the extreme left and right of the diagram: significant constraints are found for all four language/ethnic groups. These are the products of general phonological processes; they are based on an articulatory apparatus that is shared by all groups. For the preceding segment, it is found, as usual, that sibilants favor deletion the most, and are followed by nasals, stops, other fricatives and laterals. This ordering has been shown to correlate with the general obligatory contour principle (Guy and Boberg 1997). White and African-American subjects are closely aligned, as shown by the .98 correlation coefficients in Table 16.5. Correlations with the Latino groups are lower. The major effect for the S and E groups is the favoring of deletion by a preceding sibilant, but there is no significant effect among other preceding segments.

The effect of a following segment conforms to the fine-grained divisions developed in Labov (1997). These effects are largely explained by the sonority hierarchy and by the possibility of resyllabification⁶ – general phonetic principles (Guy 1991). Here the agreement of the four groups is somewhat greater. All groups show deletion mostly before laterals and nasals, with a parallel fall-off for other obstruents,

Table 16.5 Pearson correlations for effect of preceding segments by communal group (abbreviations as in Table 16.3)

	A	W	E	S
African-American	x	.98	.83	.57
White		x	.52	.41
Latino (Eng)			x	.41
Latino (Span)				x

glides and vowels. For all, pause is not significantly different from a following vowel.⁷ The two Latino groups follow the same pattern, with one striking exception: the Latino (English) group shows a high probability of deletion before /y/.

The grammatical constraint, specific to English and so far replicated for all native English speakers, is the most important one for this discussion of group relations. Again, white and African-American struggling readers follow the expected patterns in lock step. The derivational class of *lost*, *kept*, *found*, etc. is leading in this group, rather than being intermediate. This is consistent with the finding of Guy and Boyd (1990) that children of this age treat derivational verbs as monomorphemic (see also Labov 1989b).⁸ Neither Latino group shows a significant effect of grammatical status.

Figure 16.3 shows significant results for three other factor groups, which again show close agreement between African-American and white groups. Voicing agreement registers the strong favoring of deletion by homovoiced clusters (*just*, *old*, etc.) as opposed to heterovoiced (*went*, *help*, etc.). Words with two preceding consonants (*next*, *helped*, *rinsed*, etc.) regularly favor deletion over those with only one. Although previous studies of *-t*, *d* deletion have not focused on the difference between voiced and voiceless finals (/t/ versus /d/), these results show a strong favoring of /t/ deletion as compared to /d/ deletion, all other things being equal. The higher rates of deletion in unstressed syllables, which is frequently found in studies of *-t*, *d* deletion, do not appear here, probably because of the low number of unstressed syllables in the vocabulary of this age range (516 out of the 9,569 tokens). The Latino (S) group does not show significant effects in any of these factor groups.

The overall result of this study of consonant cluster simplification is that the major outlines of the process are reproduced among young members of the Latino speech community, but in a way that reflects general phonological principles rather than direct transmission. The fine detail is missing, just as in the studies of diffusion from place to place. Most importantly, the more abstract grammatical constraints on *-t*, *d* deletion are absent. This yields further insight into the difference between transmission within the speech community and diffusion across community lines.

16.4 The Diffusion of Grammatical Variables to Adult Members of the African-American Community

The project on Urban Minorities on Linguistic Change (UMLC) began a study of communication across racial lines in Philadelphia. It was spurred by observations that led us to believe that there was more communication than most people realized. Our conclusions (Labov and Harris 1986, Ash and Myhill 1986, Graff et al. 1986) were in the opposite direction. We found that, as a consequence of increasing residential segregation, the amount of black/white contact was diminishing and that, as a result, linguistic changes within AAVE were leading to increasing divergence between this dialect and the surrounding communities. A major piece of evidence for this conclusion was the study of the social networks shown in Figure 16.4, centering around our chief field worker, Wendell Harris. This figure does not offer a conventional view of social networks – one based on frequency of contact

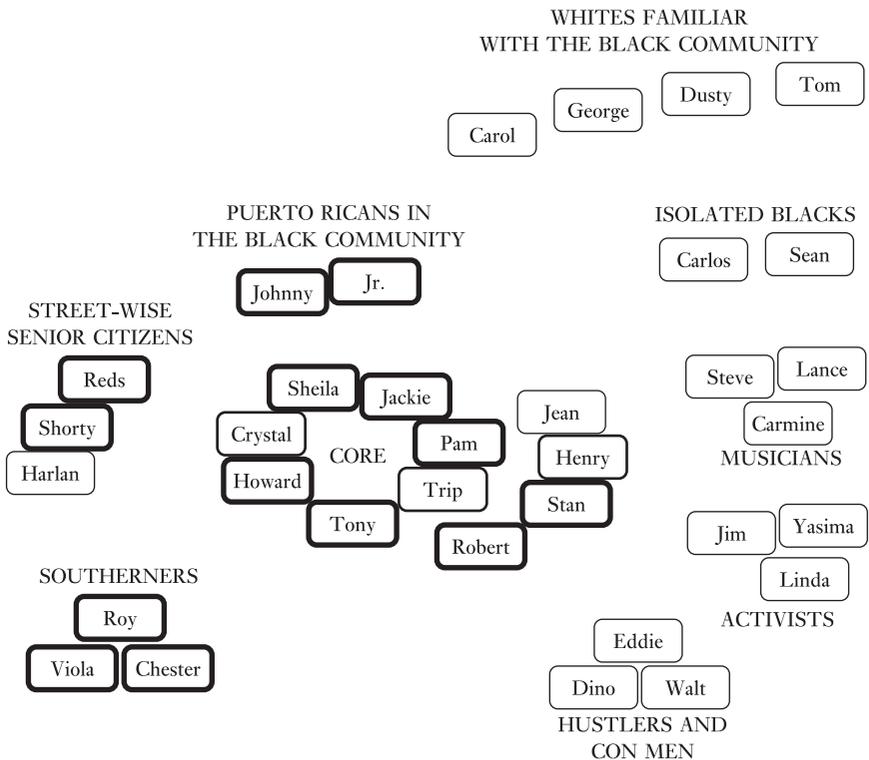


Figure 16.4 Verbal {s} distribution among social networks of West Philadelphia (Labov and Harris 1986)

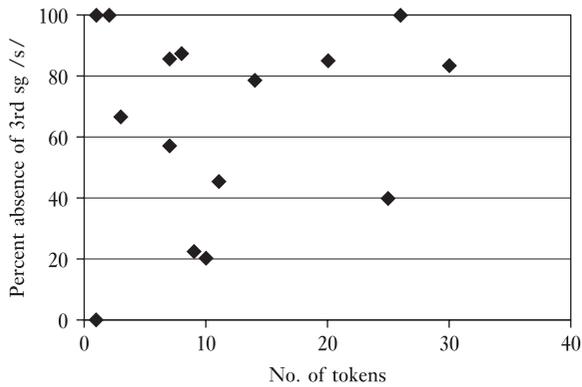


Figure 16.5 Percent absence of third singular /s/ by number of tokens for Philadelphia African-Americans in the UMRP sample of struggling readers

– but rather a display by social histories: people with similar social histories are grouped together. As shown by the key in upper left, the weight of the border surrounding each name is associated with a given percentage of third singular {s} used by that speaker.

In the center is the core group: five men and seven women born and raised in Philadelphia. These are people who answer Baugh's (1983) description of users of the vernacular. In their daily lives, they live with, talk with, and work with African-Americans, and have limited contacts with speakers of other dialects. In a number of long recorded sessions, women spoke with vehemence, anger and amusement about their relations with the men, with each other or with the interviewer, denouncing various others for their violations of the moral code and for various degrees of unfaithfulness. The recordings of this core group come even closer to the target vernacular than did our earlier group sessions in Harlem (Labov et al. 1968).

Several groups are set aside at the left of Figure 16.5 because of their different social histories. These include three members of the core group who were born in the South, three people interviewed at a senior citizens center who had the same knowledge of street life as members of the core group, and two Puerto Ricans, English-dominant, who had married into the black community.

The absence of verbal /s/ in the third singular present form of the verb paradigm in AAVE is the major indicator of the general absence of subject-verb agreement, perhaps the most profound difference between this dialect and others. It shows up in the uniform use of irregular verbs *do*, *have* and *was* in all persons and in considerable variation in subject/verb inversion, all of which indicate the absence of an inflectional node to which tense is attached. The original vernacular target is displayed in Figure 16.5, which shows the frequency of third singular /s/ absence for fifteen African-American children in the Philadelphia subset of the UMRP project discussed in the last section. The horizontal axis shows the total number

of tokens for each individual. The group average is 64 percent absence, but the scattergram indicates that this value is actually the product of two distinct distributions. The majority is centered around a mode of 85 percent, and a minority around a mode of 40 percent. It should also be remembered that these were recordings made in a school setting, with an interviewer whom the speaker had known for only a short time, so that some shift away from the vernacular is to be expected for some individuals.

Figure 16.4 is therefore designed to show which adult individuals maintain the vernacular norm of third singular /s/ absence of over 75 percent. A sizeable majority of the names in these groups are labeled with the heavy border that indicates 75–100% absence for the core group, the Southerners and the senior citizens, all of whom have spent most of their lives in the AAVE social context. The Puerto Ricans represent the confluence of Spanish L1 influence and AAVE influence, corresponding to the pattern of Puerto Rican youth with extensive black contacts in Wolfram (1974).

On the right and upper margins of this figure are fifteen individuals in five groups whose symbols show the minimal border weight associated with a high rate – over 50 percent – of subject/verb agreement. At the top are four white speakers with extensive black contacts. Carol is a waitress who lives with an African–American man; her speech is marked by many superficial features of AAVE prosody and vocabulary. George made many close contacts with African–Americans in prison. He was described by a member of the core group, who introduced him by saying, “This boy, if he turned his back when he was talking to you, you wouldn’t know if he was black or white.” Extracts from his speech were regularly associated with black ethnicity in the UMLC matched guise experiment (Graff et al. 1986). Yet for these white speakers, intimate contacts with African–Americans did not weaken the pattern of subject/verb agreement that marked their original vernacular.

The individuals Carlos and Sean on Figure 16.5 are African–Americans who had consciously asserted their independence from African–American culture and society, and their speech reflected this isolation in many ways.

The musicians Steve, Lance and Carmine are three of the many African–Americans in Philadelphia who are immersed in the professional music world. Carmine is the most well known and successful, one of the country’s best known bass guitarists. Like most musicians, these three often play with, work for and deal with whites on a daily basis.

Jim, Yasima and Linda are political activists, engaged daily in vigorous confrontations with the dominant white politicians of Philadelphia.

Walt, Dino and Eddie are street hustlers and con men, engaged in illegal and semi-legal activities that require frequent interaction with whites.

It is evident from this display that those adults who have interacted extensively with speakers of the surrounding mainstream dialect have absorbed a considerable amount of third singular /s/ marking, without necessarily changing other features of AAVE which mark them as members of the black community.

On the other hand, those who do not engage in such day-to-day interaction with speakers of other dialects retain the original absence of subject/verb agreement in AAVE grammar.

16.5 Directions of Diffusion in the Latino Community

Several studies have indicated that the Latino speech community incorporates a wider variety of diffusion patterns than we find in the African–American community. Most speakers in the African–American community can be ranged along a single dimension, from AAVE to Standard African–American English, which differs from other Standard English dialects by only a few phonological features. On the other hand, Latinos growing up in various American speech communities may be oriented towards three directions of dialect development. A number of published studies of differential linguistic socialization document these shifts: Wolfram’s study of Puerto Rican youth with variable relation to the black community (1974); Poplack’s 1978 study of a North Philadelphia school with mixed black/white/Puerto Rican population; Fought’s report on Latino girls in Northern California (1999, 2003); and Wolford’s 2006 investigation of the speech of Latino struggling readers in Philadelphia and California. Labov and Pedraza (1994) studied the linguistic and political identification of Puerto Rican adolescents in New York City.

- a Some Latinos shift in the same direction as speakers of the local white vernacular. This is especially characteristic of females. Thus Poplack (1978) found the Philadelphia centralization of /ay/ before voiceless consonants among some Puerto Rican speakers. Labov and Pedraza (1994) found that girls from the Bronx who adapted New York City vowel shifts were identified uniformly as white by Puerto Rican listeners.
- b Other Latinos who are influenced by black street culture move towards AAVE. This is a tendency heavily concentrated among males. Wolfram (1974) shows a sharp difference between Puerto Ricans with extensive black contacts and Puerto Ricans with none. Poplack (1978) shows a tendency towards monophthongization of /ay/, which is characteristic of some young males. The South Harlem groups studied by Labov et al. (1968) included some Puerto Ricans who were indistinguishable linguistically from the African–American majority; this also applies to the North Philadelphia groups studied by Labov and Harris (1986), as shown in Figure 16.4. Wolford (2006) finds that the zero form of the possessive (*my mother house*) was strongly represented among Puerto Rican youth from Philadelphia, especially males. Labov and Pedraza (1994) reported a consistent attribution of African–American ethnicity to some Puerto Rican males who incorporated features of AAVE in their speech.

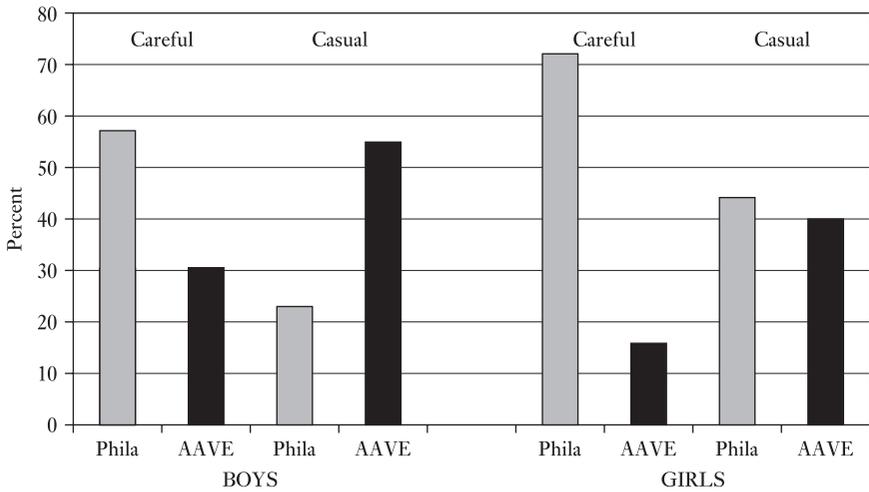


Figure 16.6 Percentage of use of Philadelphia “Canadian raising” vs AAVE monophthongization of /ay/ by style and gender for twenty-four Puerto Rican 6th graders (based on Poplack 1978, Figure 2b)

- c A third direction in Latino English is the preservation of some features showing the direct influence of Spanish on the speech of the first or second generation of native speakers of English. Thus Wolford found a strong tendency for the possessive to favor periphrastic forms among Latinos from Southern California, as in *the hand of my mother*. Poplack (1978) identified Spanish influence in the realization of /ay/ by some Puerto Rican speakers in the north Philadelphia school. Mendoza-Denton (2008) describes the use of a high front [i] in the second vowel of *anything, everything* as a symbol of Latino gang identification among girls.

The systematic character of these shifts appears in Figure 16.6, which is based on Poplack’s 1978 data on the treatment of /ay/ by Puerto Rican sixth graders in St Veronica’s school in Philadelphia: interviews conducted with 24 self-selected groups on the playground. The light grey bars show the percentage of realizations of /ay/ in the white Philadelphia pattern: centralized and backed before voiceless consonants; otherwise a diphthong with low nucleus. The dark bars show the percentage of realizations with the characteristic AAVE monophthongization or weakening of the glide. There are two strong and independent effects: the AAVE variant is favored in casual speech, and it is favored by males.

Wolford’s study of the use of the possessive by Latino struggling readers found a similar orientation towards the AAVE pattern on the part of males. Table 16.6 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis of the absence of /s/ in attributive

Table 16.6 Absence of attributive possessive -s for Latino groups

Factor group	Factor	Percentage of -s absence	Total N	Factor weight
Location	Philadelphia	35	80	0.68
	Atlanta	15	72	0.42
	California	14	76	0.38
Sex	Boys	29	86	0.61
	Girls	18	142	0.43

Source: Tonya E. Wolford, Variation in the expression of possession by Latino children, *Language Variation and Change* 18 (2006): 1–14. Factor groups not significant: group; grade; following segment

possessive forms – the characteristic AAVE form. Philadelphia, where Puerto Ricans are in close contact with African–Americans, shows a much stronger tendency than Atlanta or California, and boys much more than girls. A reverse pattern was found in California, where the periphrastic form characteristic of Spanish influence was favored by girls. Thus in both areas the influence of African–Americans was stronger for males.

These differential movements illustrate the greater complexity of the linguistic economy in Latino communities as opposed to the African–American community, and they reflect in part the differences in racial identification that are possible in Latino groups. Labov and Pedraza (1994) found a close correlation between the adoption of African–American linguistic features and the tendency to identify with blacks in racial politics. This in turn has been found to relate overtly to differences in skin color and hair form among Latino speakers.

So far I have considered diffusion across communal groups to be largely the work of adults. However, this is not necessarily the case when we consider diffusion from the African–American community to the Latino community. Recent studies of Latino youth in Philadelphia find a consistent and native-like use of habitual *be* among speakers, including those who have no particular contact with black speakers of AAVE. This suggests that grammatical influence may have been generalized with a consistency that is characteristic of contact among young speakers with full language learning capacity – that is, of transmission rather than diffusion.

16.6 The Nature of Diffusion across Communal Boundaries

Chapters 5 to 13 of this volume have dealt with linguistic change in progress in the relatively uniform communities of mainstream North American English. The

geographic data of ANAE were designed to obtain speakers from the majority ethnic groups of each city sampled (see ANAE, Table 4.2). Of the 762 subjects, 217 were of German origin; 51 Italian; 36 Scandinavian; 52 Polish and other Slavic. ANAE results show that these groups have been assimilated into the linguistic mainstream of the North American community, just as Table 16.1 showed them assimilated in residential patterns. They, became prototypical exponents of the low back merger, the Northern Cities Shift, the Canadian Shift, the Southern Shift and other sound changes of North America. On the other hand, those groups that were isolated through increasing patterns of residential segregation developed other norms, though they were never totally isolated from the mainstream dialect. This chapter has shown how the diffusion of features through adult contact produces various degrees of influence and approximation to the sound systems of the surrounding community. So far, the grammatical system of AAVE has been largely resistant to the norms of the surrounding communities, though this may change over time if residential segregation declines.