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Title: “Origin of AAVE features in Puerto Rican English spoken in North Philadelphia”

Abstract:

Several studies have documented similarities between urban Puerto Rican English (PRE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (e.g. Labov 1966, Wolfram 1973, Poplack, 1978, Zentella 1997). The similarities range through virtually all aspects of language: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexical items, prosody, etc. In fact, Zentella (1997:46) says “It was nearly impossible to distinguish verbally some of [the Puerto Rican] youngsters from African Americans” in her New York study. Initial tests we administered have corroborated this for the North Philadelphia community.

Our study examines several phonological and morphosyntactic variables among Puerto Rican immigrants and their bilingual children living in a North Philadelphia community. We will focus in detail on one or two of the following:

- monophthongization of /ay/
- deletion of word-final consonant clusters
- habitual “be”
- zero copula
- preterite “had”

We are interviewing PRE speakers from three different age groups: young children, adolescents, adults, in order to ascertain at what age they obtain the AAVE features. The adults use these features infrequently, and their English is heavily affected by transfer from Spanish. However, both of the younger groups use the features widely. Our presentation will report on our findings about the origins of these features in the speech of children. If the adolescents use the features with higher frequency than the young children, our hypothesis is that they are acquired through direct contact with the black community. However, if both groups use the features with the same frequency, then it is more likely that the features are being spread as part of a common, nonstandard urban dialect. If conclusive, these findings will be important for a theory of urban dialect contact and language change.