

Untangling Language Attitudes from Linguistic Knowledge in Self-Reports of Stigmatized Speech

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This paper uses a novel, four-dimensional scale for evaluating speaker knowledge of and attitude toward five constructions of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and two constructions characteristic of the White community in Philadelphia.

Negative language attitudes often prevent speakers from accurately reporting their actual use and understanding of stigmatized features (Labov 1975). Additionally, speakers' own attitudes toward their language use are sometimes at odds with the attitudes of the mainstream community (Trudgill 1972, Labov 2006). The goal of this paper is to measure speakers' knowledge and attitudes on features of AAVE and the local Philadelphia dialect using a scale that accounts for this complexity.

Data were collected as part of the Impact of Higher Education on Local Phonology (IHELP) project. Undergraduates at a nationally-oriented university in Philadelphia were trained to conduct sociolinguistic interviews with Philadelphia-native family and friends. Each interview contained a section eliciting grammatical judgments on five AAVE constructions (habitual *be*, completive *done*, indignant *come*, preterit *had*, and remote *been*) and two traditional Philadelphia constructions (*done*+DP and positive *anymore*). Black and White speaker judgments were looked at separately.

Score	Knowledge		Attitude	
	Reported	Demonstrated	Self	Other
3	Uses	Uses	Positive	Positive
2	Heard	Knows	Neutral	Neutral
1	Never heard	Doesn't know	Negative	Negative

Table 1: Four-dimensional scale for speaker knowledge and attitude towards grammatical constructions

Table 1 shows the four-dimensional scale used to categorize 23 African American subjects' knowledge and attitudes of the constructions. Each category was rated with a number between one and three. Reported knowledge registers the subject's claim of use or recognition of the construction while Demonstrated knowledge is our analysis of responses to a series of questions on the meaning of each construction and whether the construction of interest is employed during the course of the interview. Attitude scores report subjects' own attitudes toward a construction (Self) as well as their interpretation of the community's evaluation (Other).

Figure 1 summarizes the ratings on the four-dimensional scale for the 23 Black subjects. The results illustrate a difference between Demonstrated and Reported knowledge of the five AAVE constructions. For four of the constructions, Reported knowledge is greater than Demonstrated knowledge. However, for habitual *be*, subjects downplay their actual knowledge. For all AAVE features except *had*, attitudes are overall more negative than both Reported and Demonstrated knowledge, with Other attitudes being more negative than Self attitudes. Importantly, habitual *be* is the only construction where Self attitudes are negative. The results for knowledge and attitude of habitual *be* are consistent with it being a salient and stigmatized construction. These results contrast sharply with those for the two White Philadelphia constructions.

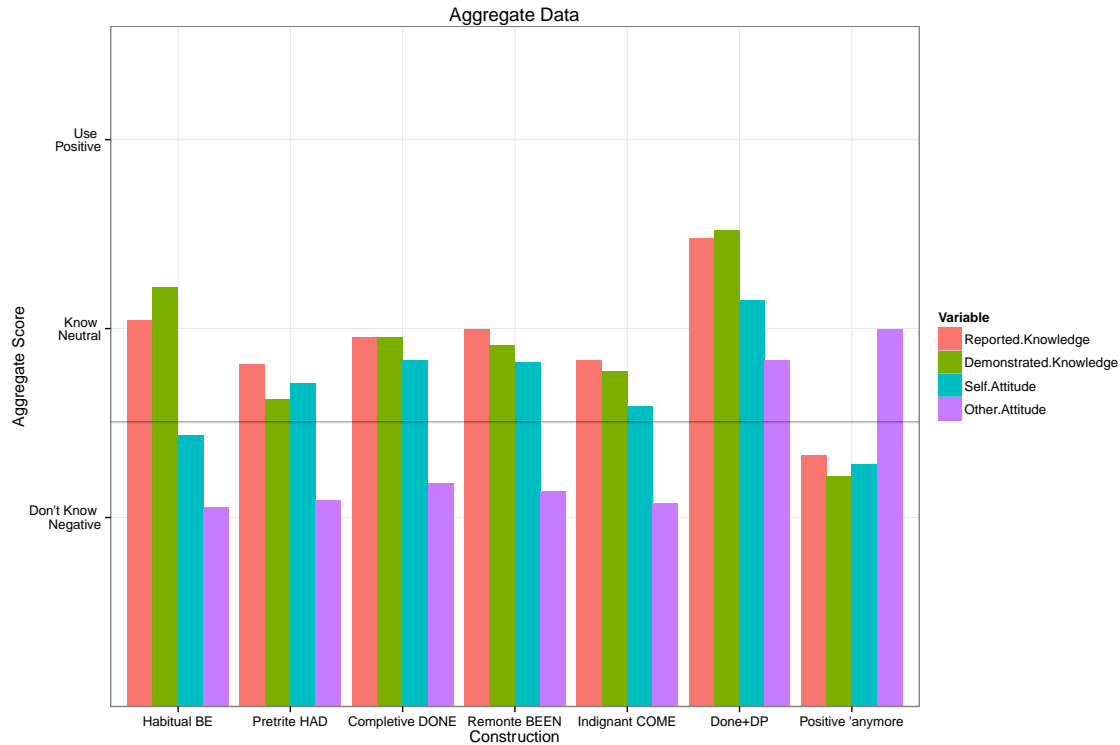


Figure 1: Aggregate knowledge and attitudes scores for 23 Black Philadelphia subjects. Line drawn at the midpoint between *Negative* and *Neutral* evaluation.

The four-dimensional scale used in this study captures both knowledge of linguistic structures and attitudes toward them. Furthermore, this new scale is able to capture the higher salience of habitual *be* as well as the effect of this salience on Reported knowledge. We compare these results to the attitudes of White subjects toward AAVE constructions and constructions that are stigmatized in the White community such as positive *anymore*.

Selected References

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