

New Ways of Analyzing African American English: Examining the Speech of Adolescent Girls in Washington, DC

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The descriptive literature on African American English (AAE) is one of the most robustly represented areas of sociolinguistics. Yet, the study of AAE has focused almost exclusively on the verbal skills of boys and men. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Morgan 2002), there is a paucity of attention to the speech of urban adolescent girls, particularly in East Coast metropolitan areas where the pioneering studies of AAE were initiated. At the same time, since Fasold's (1972) study, Washington, DC has received only scant attention, despite its consistent ranking as one of 10 US cities with the largest Black population. This study addresses these gaps by examining the language of inner-city adolescent girls in Washington, DC. Interviews were obtained from 20 semi-structured, one-on-one, hour-long interviews collected as part of an ethnographic, sociological study of a DC summer program for inner-city Black adolescents. This study thus further explores how sociolinguists can use data collected for other purposes to complement our traditional reliance on the sociolinguistic interview.

With this unique corpus, we investigate several substantive and methodological questions. Employing variationist methods, we consider vernacular norms in the DC community, describing the patterning of six AAE features: copula absence, 3rd singular *-s* absence, *was* leveling, *r*-lessness, consonant cluster reduction, and the realization of interdental fricatives. These data are compared with other populations (e.g., Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972), to speak to (regional) variation and change in urban AAE. We also integrate our quantitative study with discourse-level work by employing innovative analytic and visualization tools (discussed, e.g., in Kendall 2007). For example, we examine clustering of AAE features in discourse using a visualization technique in which variable tabulation data are overlaid on a graphical timeline of the speech event. Through this technique, we more holistically analyze constellations of variables by situating these data in terms of the interaction features—such as overlap, pause, and speech rate—of the interview events themselves. By associating sections of the interviews in which AAE features cluster with topic and interactional cues, we provide quantitative measures for such fundamental concepts as “attention paid to speech” (e.g., Eckert and Rickford 2001) and contribute to sociolinguistic models of narrative structure (Labov 1972). Our work thus integrates correlational sociolinguistic analysis and discourse analysis in ways that offer new possibilities for mixed methodological work across quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistic traditions.

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