

The Prosodic Rhythm of Two Varieties of Native American English  
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Varieties of Native American English, especially those spoken by groups east of the Mississippi River, have been relatively underrepresented in the description of ethnolinguistic variation in American English, and almost completely disregarded in terms of prosody, arguably one of the most striking features of some ethnolinguistic varieties. This paper examines one aspect of prosody, rhythm, using the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) as applied previously to British and Singapore English (Low, Grabe, & Nolan 2001), African American and Southern English (Thomas & Carter 2006), and Hispanic English (Carter 2005). PVI, which normalizes for overall speaking rate, compares adjacent syllables, where a greater difference corresponds with a more stress-timed language and a smaller difference corresponds with a more syllable-timed language.

The analysis focuses on Eastern Cherokee English as spoken in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Lumbee English as spoken in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina. Though both groups are primarily rural, their backgrounds vary. The Eastern Cherokee are a federally recognized tribe with knowledge of their ancestral language but small numbers (about 6,000). They are the only ethnic minority of note in their region surrounded by European Americans. The Lumbee, on the other hand, have much larger numbers (over 46,000), making them approximately equal in number to their African American and European American cohorts; they are also the largest tribe east of the Mississippi. The Lumbee have no current ancestral language, as they are most likely the result of an ethnogenic mix of several tribes decimated by disease and war after the arrival of Europeans. In fact, they were "discovered" in the 1730s speaking English. They are federally recognized without entitlements, placing them in an indeterminate position with respect to their status. Previous studies of these two groups (Anderson 1999, Coggshall 2006, Schilling-Estes 2000, Wolfram & Dannenberg 1999) have shown that, while the Eastern Cherokee differ little from their non-Indian cohorts in vowel quality and syntax, the Lumbee do differ from their non-Indian cohorts.

The rhythm data, however, show a different pattern. Eastern Cherokee English is much more syllable-timed than European Americans, but Lumbee English does not differ from either their European or African American cohorts' English, though there is a slight shift towards more syllable-timing in the younger speakers. The pattern among the Eastern Cherokee is most likely the result of a substrate influence from Cherokee passed down to the monolingual English generations. On the other hand, have not had a native speaker of the Lumbee language or languages for many generations and, indeed, we do not know the nature of the prosodic structure of such languages. Thus, the prosodic rhythm of Lumbee English is unsurprising.

This initial inquiry into suprasegmental aspects of varieties of Native American English suggests that prosodic rhythm may be a locus of a pan-Native American English ethnolinguistic variety, much like the glottal stop as proposed by Rowicka (2005). The detailed comparison of these varieties further offers an enhanced understanding of issues such as substrate influence and dialect contact.

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