Ain’t for Didn’t in AAE: Change vs. Age Grading
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Background

- Ain’t exists in many varieties of English where it varies with hasn’t/haven’t and isn’t/aren’t, etc. In African American English (AAE), it also varies with didn’t (e.g., At that time, I ain’t really know what it was).
- Ain’t in the past tense is thought to be a 20th century innovation (Wolfram 2004). Howe (2005) shows that speakers of historical and conservative varieties of AAE have lower frequencies of ain’t in the past tense (<6%) than speakers of more contemporary varieties (20-60%).
- There is an age effect for ain’t in the past tense context in Philadelphia (Ash & Myhill 1986). Is this age effect indicative of change or age grading?

Change

- Other features of AAE (habitual be, preterit had, verbal –s absence) are 20th century innovations tied to residential segregation in the urban North following migration from the rural South (Labov & Harris 1986, Myhill & Harris 1986, Bailey & Maynor 1987 & 1989, Cukor-Avila & Bailey 1995).
- Ain’t in the simple past is used infrequently in rural, Southern AAE during the period of the Great Migration (Wolfram 2004).

Age Grading

- Adult speakers are over represented in the varieties of AAE examined in Howe 2005.
- Some vernacular features increase in adolescence: younger speakers may have higher rates of a vernacular variable than older speakers during times of community stability (Labov 1965, Rickford 2013).

Data and Methods

  - 36 with 10+ tokens of ain’t/didn’t (888 tokens total).
  - 27 with 10+ tokens of ain’t/other (824 tokens total).
  - 23 with >10 tokens in both contexts.
- Speakers varied by *age (YOB 1901 - 1969), gender (F, M), *level of education (<HS, HS, HS+), region of origin (South vs. Philadelphia), and relationship to the interviewer (Stranger, Acquaintance, Friend, Family).

Conclusions

- Community change toward increased use of ain’t over didn’t in apparent time, but ain’t as a general vernacular variant does not show age grading.
- On the other hand, younger speakers may increasingly be treating ain’t as a unified variant across variable contexts. This finding falls in line with work on the variant as the locus of social meaning (Campbell-Kibler 2011, Dinkin 2016, Maddeaux & Dinkin 2017).

Discussion & Expansions

- Evidence points to change over time, but average rate for speakers < 20 is 49%, compared to 46% in Labov et al. 1968. Is this due to regional differences? Differences in demographics (Gender, Contact) or individual differences?
- Semantic differences between older and younger speakers is a sign of change (Cukor-Avila & Bailey 1995).
  - Overlapping semantics between simple past (didn’t) and present perfect (hasn’t/haven’t).
  - Variation in morphological form for verbs following ain’t in the simple past (e.g., give vs. gave).
- What would a resampling of the community reveal?

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