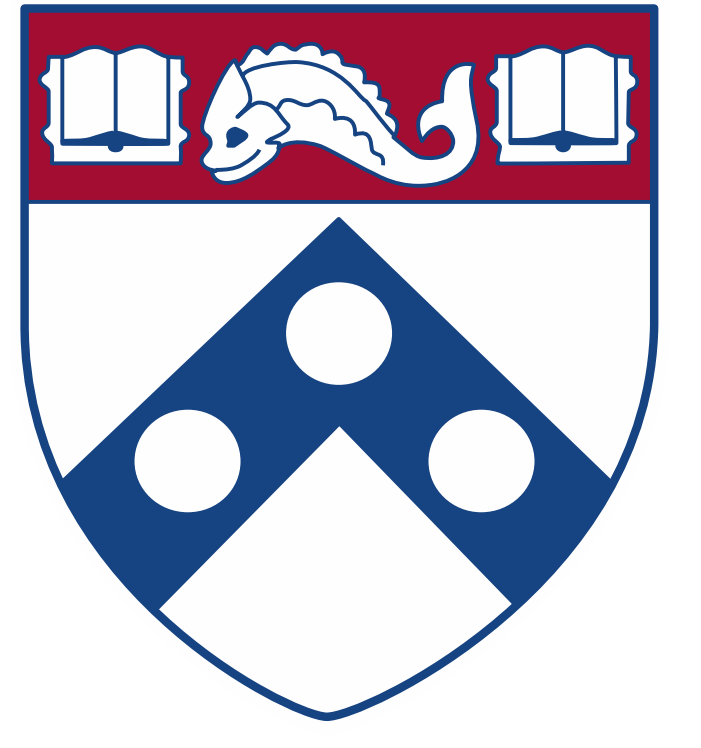


# Ain't for Didn't in AAE: Change vs. Age Grading



Sabriya Fisher, University of Pennsylvania  
sabriya@ling.upenn.edu

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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%).<sup>1</sup>
- 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 **20<sup>th</sup> 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

- **40** speakers from the UMLC corpus (Influence of Urban Minorities on Linguistic Change, Philadelphia, 1981-84).
  - **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).

## % Ain't in two grammatical environments by age



**Solid line:** Linear regression of % *ain't* for *didn't* by age ( $p < 0.001$ ). Age is also significant at  $p < 0.05$  with speakers under 20 years old excluded (not pictured).

**Dashed line:** Linear regression of % *ain't* in other environments by age ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Dotted line:** Linear regression of the difference in % *ain't* for *didn't* vs. % *ain't* in other environments by age ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## 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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<sup>1</sup>Howe 2005 compiles data from several sources: Bailey et al. 1991 for the Ex-slave Recordings, Schneider 1989 and Kautzsch 2000 for the Virginian Narratives, Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001 and Howe 1995 for African Nova Scotia English and Samana English, Labov et al. 1968 for Harlem, Ash & Myhill 1986 for Philadelphia, and Weldon 1994 for Columbus, OH. \*This work has benefited from an National Science Foundation DDRI Grant for the project *Variation and Change in Past Tense Negation in African American English*. I would like to thank members of the Tamminga Lab as well as William Labov and Gillian Sankoff for feedback at various stages of this research. This work is also indebted to Wendell A. Harris and those community members who participated in his research. All mistakes and oversights are my own.