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## GEOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY, RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION, AND THE VITALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH AND ITS SPEAKERS

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*William Labov's argument that there is an inverse relationship between the continued segregation and endangerment of African Americans and the survival of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a strong one. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to question some of the details of this argument. It may be inappropriate to believe that AAVE is uniform across geographic locations, and even where it is uniform, it is important to ask how such uniformity was developed and maintained. Assuming a direct link between using AAVE and low scholastic achievement among African American students may be overly simplistic as well, and it is essential to consider the ways in which teachers can influence this relationship. Moreover, many African Americans value aspects of their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, so it is not a foregone conclusion that widespread integration will lead to the disappearance of Black speech.*

**KEYWORDS:** *African American Vernacular English (AAVE), segregation, geographic uniformity, linguistic divergence, integration, reading achievement, Black-White achievement gap*

Labov's paper for the November 2007 presidential session at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association embodies a thesis that is as provocative as its title.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the usual finding that languages are endangered as their speakers become endangered, Labov suggests that in the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), there is an inverse relationship. The dialect is flourishing as a distinct entity in the wake of acute 20th century segregation that spawns poverty and endangers the educational success, economic well-being, and family structure of African Americans. And—although this angle is less developed—if African Americans were less segregated and therefore less endangered educationally, economically, and in other respects, AAVE as a variety might lose its distinctness and maybe even its survival. (But that need not be such a bad thing.)

There is much in this forceful paper with which I agree. To begin with, I agree that African Americans who are most segregated, most impoverished, and in other respects most disadvantaged are the ones in whose speech we can observe some of the most distinctive varieties of AAVE. I also agree, as noted in Rickford (1997), that sociolinguists who have drawn substantially on AAVE for our theories and careers—and that includes Labov as well as myself—owe it to the African American community to provide service in return. I agree that the high rate at which schools fail to teach African American students to read and succeed in school represents a crisis of monumental proportions, the more so because it is linked to their failure to get jobs and build two-parent families in the future, and to their success in falling into the clutches of the rapacious criminal justice system. The anger and despair that Labov personifies in the stories of Riana and Latasha are not characteristic of every inner-city child, thank God, but they are not unprecedented either. In the academy-award winning (1993) film by Alan and Susan Raymond, *I am a Promise: The Children of Stanton Elementary School*,<sup>2</sup> one can see many more examples of African American children (in Philadelphia) dealing with excruciating family and community problems, and crippling school failure. Finally, I share Labov's conviction that linguists have a role to play in improving academic success. I am delighted by and also involved in California's new attempt to take AAVE into account to help struggling African American readers via their 2008 textbook adoption criteria,<sup>3</sup> and I greatly admire Labov's work with Houghton Mifflin to create stories like "Grounded" that simultaneously address children's conflicts and the specific grammatical features like past tense *-ed* that African American students may have trouble with.

In the face of these major agreements, the points on which I have disagreements or questions might seem like quibbles about matters of detail. But details matter to linguists and anthropologists, no less

than they do to academics in other fields, and they suggest areas for future research that we—and our students—should pursue.

One generalization that linguists are beginning to question is the claim about the relative geographic uniformity of AAVE. Labov concentrates on the distinctive grammatical features of AAVE, like copula (forms of the verb *be*) and possessive *-s* absence (as in *John book* instead of *John's book*), invariant habitual *be* (as in *Wanda be studying all the time*), and future perfect or resultative *be done* (as in *Tina better look out—she be done had her baby at 40 North 51st*); and, indeed these do appear to be shared by African Americans across the country, especially in urban areas. Labov also concedes the existence of some regional phonological features, especially involving the pronunciation of /r/after a vowel. But Green (2002) and Fought (2006) suggest that the pronunciation differences, especially for vowels, may be more extensive. Fought also notes (2006:60) that European American regional dialects are primarily distinguished by phonetic and phonological features, so the importance of regional phonetic/phonological variation in AAVE should not be downplayed (See Thomas and Yaeger-Dror 2010). Moreover, as Charity's (2007) Figure 3 shows (reprinted here as Figure 1), there are significant phonological and morphosyntactic differences between the vernacular used by 157 African American children in New Orleans, Cleveland, and Washington, DC, on a sentence imitation and story-retelling task. The New Orleans children, in particular, show significantly higher frequencies of consonant cluster

simplification (reducing the number of consonants, usually at the end of a word), zero possessive, and third person singular *-s* absence (as in *Sam run a lot* instead of *Sam runs a lot*) than children in the other cities (See also Wolfram 2007). Cross-regional studies of AAVE are in their infancy (but see Butters 1989 for a good survey), and future studies may well challenge our current conceptions.

A related question, which has not generally been asked, is this: Even if AAVE *is* as regionally uniform as most people have suggested, how did this uniformity come about, and how is it maintained? Because we know that 90 percent of the African American population was concentrated in the Deep South at the end of the 19th century (Bailey 1993; Johnson and Campbell 1981), a very plausible explanation would be that the uniform features were present in the varieties spoken by 19th century Southern African Americans, diffused outwards by those who migrated to points North and West and retained there by the forces of segregation that Labov describes. This might work for features like completive, also termed perfect, auxiliary verb *done* (as in *He done took my hat*) that appear to be old Southern features. But Labov's contention that modern AAVE is a creation of the 20th century, especially for features like preterit *had* and invariant habitual *be* with progressives (e.g., *He be workin at Uncle Bob's*, as opposed to this form occurring before a predicate noun, adjective, etc., e.g., *He be home*), works against this. (Preterit *had* typically occurs at or near the beginning of a story and is used where standard English would require a Simple Past verb

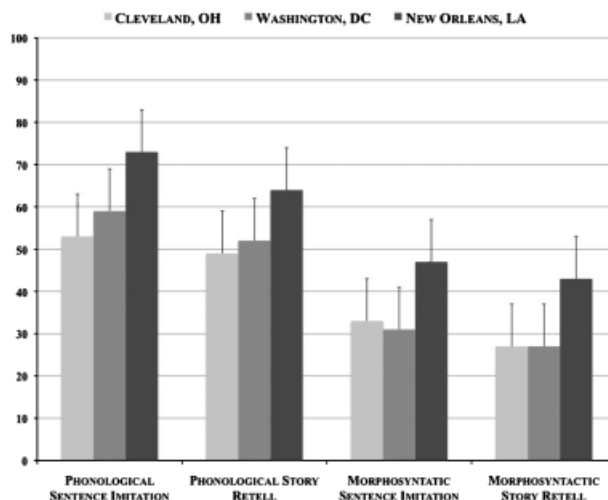


Figure 1. Regional differences in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) use by children in Cleveland, DC, and New Orleans, for phonological and morphosyntactic features (Fig. 3 in Charity 2007).

form, e.g., *You know, like, I saw Rosa come in, and then she had start yellin . . .* instead of . . . *Rosa come in, and then she started yellin . . .*.) It might be thought that these features were spread by radio, television, and the movies; but, sociolinguists (including Labov) generally feel that language features are spread more by face-to-face contacts and communication. Of course, the spread of these features could be another of those city-to-city diffusions that Trudgill (1983) has described, and the spreading agents could be weak ties between networks that Granovetter (1973) and Milroy (2002:562–565) see as important for the diffusion of innovations. Certainly, there is a tradition of African Americans in the North and West visiting African American family and friends in the South, and when African Americans travel from city to city, they tended to seek out the African American sectors either by force (Jim Crow laws) or choice. But the uniformity of result (Wolfram and Thomas’ 2002 “supraregional norm”) is still striking, and unless we assume that the same feature was innovated simultaneously and independently in multiple cities, we would have to assume that it began in one Northern or Western city and spread outwards from there—something we have NO evidence of for ANY feature.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper Labov says, citing Bailey (1993), that “The development of modern AAVE is contemporaneous with the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to large cities, primarily in the North.” But this brings us back to questions like what AAVE in the rural south was like before migration in the early 1900s, how similar it was to contemporary White vernaculars, and whether the two varieties have since converged or diverged in the South, especially in rural areas (See Denning 1989; Fasold et al. 1987).

There are unfortunately not as many detailed studies of AAVE in the South as there are of AAVE elsewhere, but a remarkable exception is Wolfram and Thomas’ (2002) study of Hyde County, North Carolina, along the Atlantic coast. Beginning in 1997, the authors studied the phonological and morphosyntactic features used by Black and White speakers in this area in four age groups, including elderly folk, aged 77–102, seniors (55–70), middle aged (32–43), and young (14–23). Although they did find evidence that the most elderly Black and White speakers shared certain nonstandard features (like third plural verbal *-s*: e.g., “The dogs barks”) that the youngest generation of Black and White speakers have since dropped (they call these receding features), they also find a number of striking cases in which the most elderly Black and White speakers differed a hundred years ago, as much as and sometimes

even more so than the youngest Blacks and Whites do today. (They call these persistent features.) One example of this is copula (*is* and *are*) absence, shown in Figure 2; another is third singular *-s* absence, shown in Figure 3. These data make it clear that whatever innovations may have been introduced into the grammar of urban AAVE in recent decades, there were major differences between Black and White speech over a hundred years ago and more, and these were present in southern and rural areas too.

Indeed, Wolfram et al. (1997) document the intriguing case of 91-year-old Muzel Bryant, the only Black person living among 700 year-round White residents (and 4,000–5,000 seasonal tourists) on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina. Born into the only Black family on Ocracoke, she grew up among O’cockers (as people from Ocracoke are called), but her usage of several vernacular features, including third singular *-s* absence and copula absence (*He big* instead of *He’s big*) (see Table 1), is closer to that of AAVE on the mainland than the White Ocracoke norm. In describing a similar case on Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, where an elderly White man living in the middle of the Black community did NOT exemplify Black morphosyntactic features even though he at first “sounded black,” I concluded in Rickford (1985) that the contact was not intimate enough for exposure to become intake, and that community expectations that Blacks and Whites should differ in language and culture kept them different even when opportunities for contact might have predicted otherwise.

The point of both island studies, and of Wolfram and Thomas’ (2002) Hyde county research, is that the wrenching residential segregation of the urban

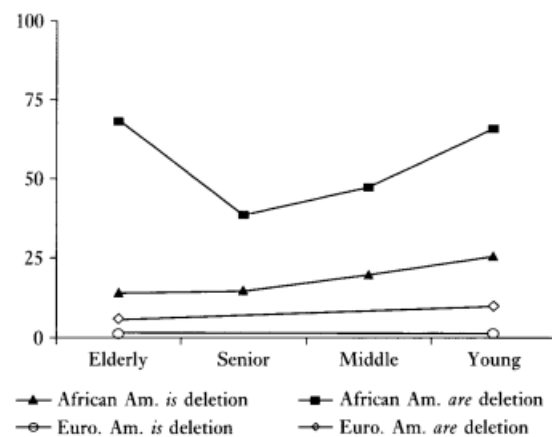


Figure 2. Persistent Black/White differences in Hyde County, NC copula absence (“They  $\emptyset$  happy”) (Fig. 5.3 in Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

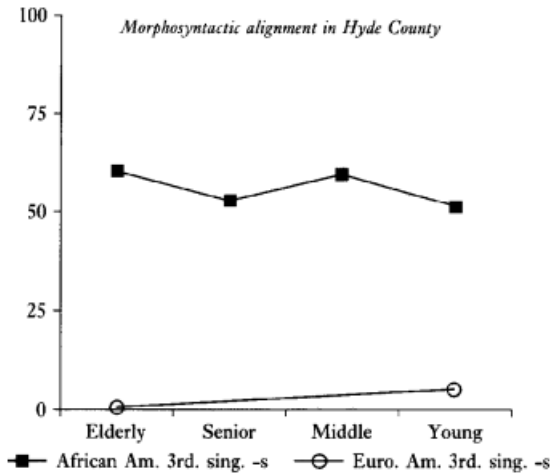


Figure 3. Persistent Black/White differences in Hyde County, NC third sg. -s absence (“He walk  $\emptyset$ ”) (Fig. 5.5 in Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

north is not a necessary condition for linguistic divergence between Blacks and Whites; sociopsychological and cultural considerations in the rural South can and do yield a similar result. One can also find copious evidence from 18th to 19th century observers that the language, and culture, of Blacks and Whites was significantly different before the 20th century. For instance, Kulikoff (1986:351, cited in Rickford 1999:248), describing the situation in Virginia and Maryland between 1740 and 1790, noted that “White observers agreed that the music, dance and religiosity of Black slaves differed remarkably from those of Whites . . . the practice of a distinctive culture within their own quarters gave them some small power over their own lives and destinies.”

Having said all this, it is undeniable that African Americans were subject to intense racial segregation

in urban centers in the North, East, and West from the time of the Great Migration (early 1900s), and, that in some respects, it worsened in successive decades. Labov’s Table 1, depicting indices of dominance (the proportion of one’s census tract that consists of the same group) for five ethnic groups in Philadelphia shows this acutely, with Blacks moving from an index of 12 in 1880 to 74 in 1970; no other group even comes close, and all other groups show a steady decline in segregation rather than an increase. More recent studies (e.g., Adelman and Gocker 2007; Iceland 2004) do show a modest decline in Black segregation across all U.S. metropolitan areas,<sup>5</sup> partly influenced, interestingly enough, not by increasing numbers of Whites, but by the increasingly multiethnic character of American inner cities, with burgeoning populations of Latinos, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. Nevertheless, African American residential segregation is still very high, higher than for any other group, and its effects with respect to poverty and social ills are indisputable. As Adelman and Gocker (2007:409) note, “Massey and Denton’s (1993:9) argument—‘that racial residential segregation—and its characteristic institutional form, the Black ghetto’—are the key structural factors responsible for the perpetuation of Black poverty in the United States’—remains as salient today as it did in the early 1990s.”

From the evidence of these social scientists, Labov’s Figure 6 is spot on in its depiction of the relation between residential segregation and other social ills that endanger the African American community, like poverty, a high crime rate, the erosion of the economic base for marriage, underfunded schools, inadequate instruction, and reading failure. But the link between AAVE and “inadequate instruction” is less clear. Labov points to the close

Table 1. Muzel Bryant’s copula Absence was More Similar to Mainland African Americans than to her Ocracoke Anglo American Neighbors (Table 4 in Wolfram et al 1997)

	Mainland African American Deleted/Total % Deleted	Muzel Bryant Deleted/Total % Deleted	Ocracoke Anglo American Deleted/Total % Deleted
PRO			
Is	2/12 16.7%	3/11 27.3%	0/32 0.0%
Are	11/16 68.8%	4/7 57.1%	0/22 0.0%
NP			
Is	4/16 25.0%	4/4 100.0%	0/6 0.0%
Are	2/4 50.0%	1/3 33.3%	0/10 0.0%

relation between high AAVE use and low achievement scores in reading. Interestingly enough, Piestrup (1973:162) had shown a similar relationship, with higher AAVE scores being associated with lower reading scores. Note, however, that it was how teachers responded to AAVE that made a difference, with the interrupting/correcting teachers having a stultifying effect on all the Black students, while the Black artful teachers were able to produce as high a score from the heavy users of Black dialect as the interrupting teacher produced from those who used little or no Black dialect. Similarly, Justice Joiner's 1979 ruling in the Ann Arbor "Black English trial" was that it was not the features of AAVE itself, but teachers' negative attitudes to and ignorance of AAVE that produced negative results (see Labov 1982; Smitherman 1981).

A word about the "integration" scenario with which Labov closes his paper: I am not sure that all or even most African Americans today would see "integration" as the solution to their ills with the same fervor that Martin Luther King, Jr., did in the 1960s. And I am not sure that AAVE would really be endangered if there were increasing contact between African Americans and Whites (recall that Muzel Bryant on Ocracoke Island continued to use AAVE features although surrounded by Whites who did not; and see Fordham and Ogbu 1986). We need to distinguish between integration and assimilation. Many African Americans want integration in the sense of access to middle-class jobs and housing and schools and other institutions. But others are also seeking housing in Black neighborhoods (like Baldwin Hills, Los Angeles) within large urban centers like Los Angeles; Washington, DC; and Atlanta, determined to retain some of their distinctive cultural traditions. Perhaps, in a Jesse Jackson conception of race mixing in a salad bowl rather than a melting pot, there will be room for distinctive linguistic traditions as well.

I do agree with Labov, as I do with Meier (2007), that building on the linguistic and cultural strengths of African American children is an important strategy for helping them read better and succeed more in school and in life. But it should also be admitted that linguists' knowledge of how to do this well is still at a rudimentary stage, once we get past the generalizations about respecting all dialects and using Contrastive Analysis to help students master Standard or Academic English (see Rickford and Rickford 2000:163–180). Literacy skills are at the heart of the problem, and linguists need to learn more about the teaching of reading and writing to produce more successful interventions. At the same

time, the experimental work of Labov and his colleagues (see the Penn Reading Initiative 2009) has shown exciting promise in closing the Black–White achievement gap, and on that hopeful note for the future, I will stop.

#### NOTES

1. A longer version of Labov's paper is available on his website: <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/Papers/UDEP.html>.

2. See <http://www.docurama.com/productdetail.html?productid=NV-NVG-9697>.

3. See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/im/documents/rlafrwkchap9.pdf>.

4. Studies by Guy Bailey and Patricia Cukor-Avila (see Bailey 1993; Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2007) do show us how teenagers from rural Springville, Texas, adopted preterit *had* and invariant *be* from nearby Texas cities, but no one has suggested that Texas was the birthplace of these features in the United States as a whole.

5. For instance, using the dissimilarity index, a measure of the evenness with which two groups are distributed in an area, Iceland reports a slight decline in segregation "from 73 in 1980 to 68 in 1990 and 64 in 2000."

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