Sociolinguistic Folklore in the Study of African American English

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Abstract

Although sociolinguists have performed a valuable service in challenging folk theories about African American English (AAE), they also have unwittingly participated in the construction of sociolinguistic folklore about variation and change in AAE. Several examples of sociolinguistic myths are presented, including the supraregional myth, the change myth, and the social stratification myth. Data used to challenge the canon of AAE description include empirical studies of different types of rural Southern African American communities as well as ethnographic observation. Historical circumstance, social and professional enculturation, and academic exclusivity are considered in explaining the construction of these questionable axioms about AAE. The examination indicates that unchallenged assumptions, unilateral explanations, and imagined dichotomies need to be scrutinized more critically with regard to the canon of AAE description.

Introduction[1]

Since the inception of sociolinguistics as a subfield of linguistics more than a half century ago, scholars have disputed folk theories of language diversity (Preston and Niedzielski 2000). No variety of English has figured more prominently in the conflict between popular beliefs and scientific interpretations of language diversity than African American English (AAE), the quintessential icon of a sociocultural variety in American English. From at least the mid-1960s, sociolinguists have doggedly attempted to counter the dominant 'deficit model' and the 'correctionist approach', which maintain that AAE is little more than an unsystematic, unworthy approximation of Standard English that should be eradicated (e.g. Baratz 1968; Labov 1969; Wolfram 1970). Sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language variation stand in stark opposition to this popular ideology, resulting in an ongoing controversy over the linguistic integrity of AAE. Myths about language are so widespread that there are entire collections devoted to confronting popular beliefs about language diversity that range from the assumed verbal depravity of black children to the romantic notion that Shakespearean English is spoken in the mountains (Bauer & Trudgill 1998). For the most part, linguists have

spoken in unanimity in their opposition to folk theories of language diversity.

Sociolinguists have no doubt performed a valuable service in challenging some of the unwarranted, popular folklore about the nature of AAE that derives from the principle of linguistic subordination (Lippi-Green 1997), whereby the language of socially subordinate groups is interpreted as linguistically inadequate and deficient by comparison with the language of their socially dominant counterparts. On a number of occasions over the last half century, linguistic testimony and social action have made important contributions to the public understanding of linguistic diversity in general and AAE in particular. These include the deficit-difference debate of the 1960s (e.g. Baratz 1968; Labov 1969), the Ann Arbor decision of the late 1970s (Center for Applied Linguistics 1979; Farr-Whiteman 1980), the Oakland Ebonics controversy in the 1990s (Rickford 1999; Baugh 2000), and linguistic profiling in the early 2000s (Baugh 2003).

At the same time, it must be recognized that sociolinguists are hardly immune from ideological lobbying in their presentations of language diversity. Johnson (2001: 606) notes, 'Linguists – like all other interested social actors – are "ideological brokers" bidding for "authoritative entextualization," that is, trying to influence those readings of language debates which will eventually emerge as dominant.'

It must be recognized that, in the process of disputing popular misconceptions about language, linguists may reify axioms that exaggerate their own claims about language, hence ironically engaging in professional folklore construction. Perhaps the most notable case in anthropological linguistics is the so-called 'Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax,' where the Eskimo language is reported to have dozens or even hundreds of words describing different types of snow. Within and outside of anthropology, the myth continues to this day, despite the data that exposed it as an urban legend (Martin 1986; Murray 1987; Pullum 1991). Once a group, public or professional, decides to accept something as a noteworthy fact, it becomes extremely difficult to rescind its acceptance. As Geoff Pullum (1991: 159) puts it, 'The persistent interestingness and symbolic usefulness overrides any lack of factuality.' Pullum observes (1991: 161) that 'linguists have been just as active as schoolteachers or general-knowledge columnists in spreading the entrancing story. What a pity the story is unredeemed piffle.' In fact, controversy over the exposure of the Eskimo vocabulary hoax within anthropology was so intense that it took Laura Martin (1986) 4 years to publish a note in the journal *American Anthropologist* after giving her article on this topic at an annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

In this discussion, I argue that sociolinguists have unwittingly created similar myths related to the study of AAE, including the supraregional myth, the unilateral change myth, and the social stratification myth. I first discuss the myths vis-à-vis the empirically justified reality, then discuss the historical circumstances and the progression of AAE study that created and perpetuated

them. In disputing some of the accepted 'facts' that seem to characterize the sociolinguistic study of AAE, I do not exclude my own culpability in their construction. In this respect, the discussion should be interpreted as self-scrutiny and personal criticism rather than censure of my sociolinguistic colleagues.

Myth, Metonymy, and Reality

Admittedly, the division between myth and reality cannot always be reduced to a simple dichotomy between fact and fiction. As Dwight Bolinger once claimed in a presidential address to the Linguistic Society of America (1973), truth is often a linguistic question, in the sense that the truthfulness of propositions is dependent upon and mitigated by principles of language use commonly consigned to the level of pragmatics. In fact, we may question whether some of the popular myths so vehemently opposed by sociolinguists are actually figurative speech about language rather than unmitigated erroneous information endorsed by the general public. The middle road of metonymy (i.e. a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated) may be illustrated by one of the commonly alleged popular beliefs about language history, namely, the notion that the speech of isolated mountain and island communities in the USA preserves Shakespearean English. This reference is no doubt based on the valid observation that some archaic lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic features are retained in these communities. Although such a broad-based claim is certainly not an accurate linguistic depiction of language retention given the dynamic nature of language, the statement figuratively captures the observation that selective language retention has, in fact, preserved the use of forms that were in use hundreds of years ago during the era when Shakespeare lived. So is the statement that Shakespearean English is spoken in isolated communities a bald-faced lie or a questionable metonymic reference to a valid observation with respect to so-called 'relic' forms? By the same token, some of the folklore that sociolinguists have unintentionally created about AAE was certainly not intended to mislead the public, but rather derives from their failure to recognize unintended readings in their conclusions.

   In the following discussion I examine three myths that have developed in the study of AAE over recent decades. One of these relates to the linguistic structure of AAE, one to the nature of language change in AAE, and one to its social distribution. Several types of evidence serve as the basis for scrutinizing these claims. First, there is an expanding demographic base for examining AAE, including a variety of regional and social situations that now extend from small, isolated communities in the rural South to large, Northern metropolitan areas. Whereas the early, canonical studies of AAE focused on its use in large, non-Southern urban contexts (e.g. Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968; Wolfram 1969; Legum, Pfaff, Tinnie, & Nichols

1971; Fasold 1972; Labov 1972), current studies represent a much more diverse set of representative regional and social demographics, particularly in the rural South (e.g. Bailey 2001; Cukor-Avila 2001; Mallinson & Wolfram 2002; Wolfram 2003; Wolfram & Thomas 2002; Carpenter 2004, 2005; Childs 2005; Childs & Mallinson 2004; Mallinson 2006). Furthermore, these descriptive studies are now complemented by perceptual studies and experimental conditions that offer insight into the interaction of regional and ethnic variables in the delimitation of AAE (e.g. Graff, Labov, & Harris 1986; Thomas 2002; Thomas & Reaser 2004; Torbert 2004; Fridland, Bartlett, & Kreuz 2004). Finally, there is an expanding body of ethnographic evidence, including observations by community participants themselves about the distribution of AAE over time and place (Childs & Mallinson 2006; Mallinson 2006). These increasingly diverse and complementary datasets serve as an empirical foundation for re-examining several of the now-entrenched assumptions about the status of AAE.

The Supraregional Myth

One of the conclusions that emerged from the first wave of AAE descriptive studies (e.g. Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Legum et al. 1971; Fasold 1972; Labov 1972) was the observation that primary structural features setting apart the vernacular speech of African Americans from their European American cohorts were shared by African American communities regardless of regional context. Thus, descriptions of morphosyntactic traits such as invariant *be* with a 'habitual' denotation (e.g. *They always be playing*), the absence of copula and auxiliary *be* (e.g. *She nice*; *she playing ball*), verbal *-s* (e.g. *She play_ ball*), possessive *-s* (*The man_ hat*), and plural *-s* absence (e.g. *Three dog_*) were well-documented in the speech of African Americans in the urban areas such as New York City (Labov et al. 1968; Labov 1972), Detroit (Wolfram 1969), Los Angeles (Legum et al. 1971), and Washington, DC (Fasold 1972), as were phonological features such as syllable-coda prevocalic consonant cluster reduction (e.g. *wes' area* for *west area*), labialization of non-initial interdental fricatives (e.g. *baf* for *bath*), and postvocalic *r*-lessness (*fea'* for *fear*). The apparent common core of AAE structures in quite disparate urban settings was unlike the regional configuration of dialects for the European American population, leading to the conclusion that vernacular AAE revealed a kind of uniformity immune to regionality. As William Labov, an influential pioneer in the study of AAE put it:

> By the 'black English vernacular' we mean the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black young in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas of New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other urban centers. It is also spoken in most rural areas and used in the casual, intimate speech of many adults. (Labov 1972: xiii)

The explicit claim rapidly became an assumed sociolinguistic position on the structural homogeneity of AAE, so that it was typically described as a uniform variety. This tacit assumption is evident in one of the earliest texts on social dialectology in American English, so that Wolfram and Fasold (1974: 11) observed simply that 'the term Vernacular Black English refers to the variety spoken by working-class blacks.' No mention is made of regional setting; their only explicit qualification was a social one acknowledging the fact that vernacular AAE was socially stratified within the African American community. Although regionality in AAE was admitted in statements such as 'there are no doubt regional differences not yet charted' (Labov 1972: xiv), such mitigation was, for all intents and purposes, practically ignored in presentations and discussions of AAE. The belief that regionality in vernacular AAE is invariably trumped by its supraregional linguistic core has now become a fundamental axiom in the study of AAE – and part of the canon of AAE description (e.g. Labov 1998; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998; Rickford 1999).

In reality, regionality has played a significant role in the earlier develop-ment of varieties of AAE and it continues to play a significant sociolinguistic function in its development. I do not disagree with the contention that there are shared, transregional linguistic structures that may distinguish AAE from regional European American varieties, but I strongly dispute the contention that regionality in AAE is insignificant and can be ignored. In a sense, one might liken the current description of AAE to the observation that American English contrasts with British English. On the one hand, it is true that there are distinguishing traits that are commonly shared by British English contra American English in the British Isles and North America, respectively, but this hardly renders insignificant the multiple dialects of British English and American English.

Investigations over the past couple of decades have now extended the demographic and social base of AAE far beyond the Northern urban contexts that characterized the initial surge of descriptive inquiry. For example, our studies of small, rural African American communities in the southeastern USA include a wide range of communities in rural North Carolina, as indicated in Figure 1. For comparison here, a couple of African American communities in the Outer Banks region, Hyde County (Wolfram 2003; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) and Roanoke Island (Carpenter 2004, 2005), a community in the Coastal Plain, Princeville (D'Andrea 2005; Rowe 2005), and two communities in the mountains of Appalachia in the western part of the state, Beech Bottom (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002) and Texana (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005; Mallinson 2006) are examined in order to represent distinct regional dialect settings of AAE.

For the sake of comparison, figures for two sample variables in these disparate settings are provided, one for postvocalic *r*-lessness (Figure 2) as in the pronunciation of *fear* as *fea'* or *fourteen* as *fou'teen*, and one for the absence of third person singular –*s* inflection (Figure 3) as in *She go* for *She*
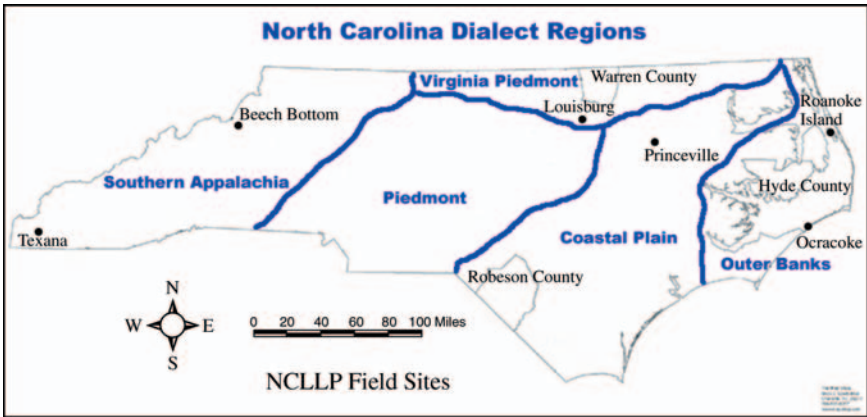
Fig. 1. Regional contexts varieties of African American English (AAE) described in North Carolina by the staff of North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP).
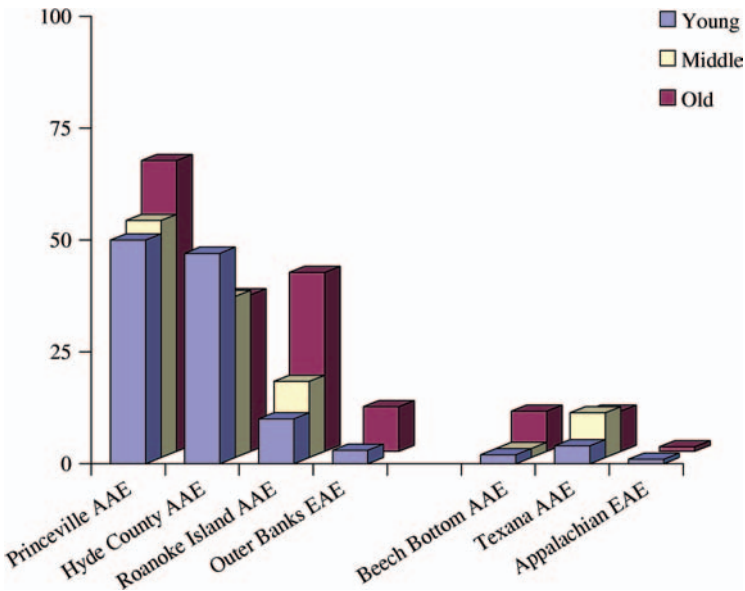

Fig. 2. Comparison of postvocalic *r*-lessness in regionally situated communities in North Carolina.

goes. Three different African American communities (Hyde County, Roanoke Island, and Princeville) in the eastern part of the state are compared with a neighbouring Outer Banks European American English community (Outer Banks EAE), and two African American communities in Appalachia (Texana, Beech Bottom) are compared with a European American Appalachian English variety (Appalachian EAE). For each community, three
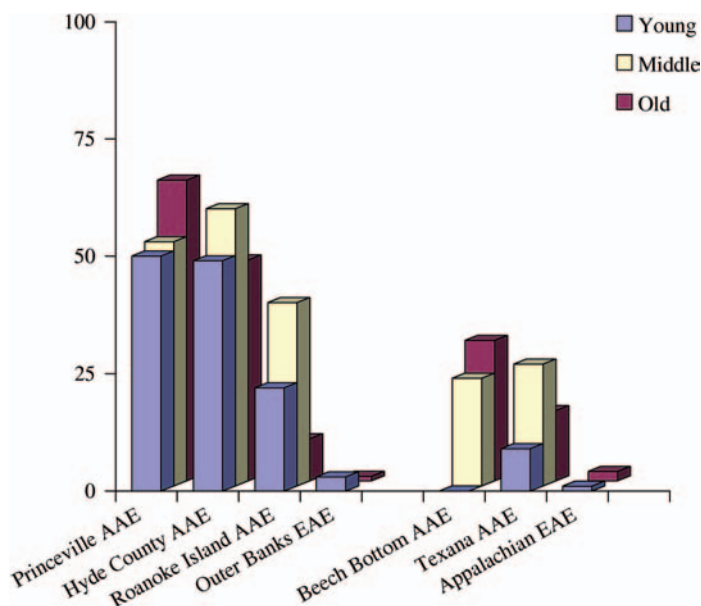
Fig. 3. Comparison of -s absence in regionally situated communities in North Carolina.

different age groups of speakers are included in order to give an indication of language change for these features over apparent time. The graphs given here are summaries; more detailed quantitative and statistical analyses are provided in the sources cited above.

First, consider the case of postvocalic *r*-lessness in Figure 2. The graphs represent the relative frequency of *r* loss in terms of potential cases where *r* might have been vocalized.

The different communities of African Americans obviously indicate *r*-lessness at very different frequency levels. The two Appalachian communities (Texana, Beech Bottom) have little *r*-lessness, much like the white Appalachian community with which it is compared. Furthermore, this seems to be a relatively stable pattern, showing little change among the different generational groups. The *r*-lessness pattern in the communities in eastern North Carolina shows more variability related to place and generation. Princeville, situated in a region that was historically *r*-less, shows the highest incidence of *r*-lessness while Hyde County and Roanoke Island, situated in a traditional *r*-full dialect region, the Outer Banks of North Carolina (Wolfram and Thomas 2002), vary considerably.

Now consider Figure 3, which summarizes the incidence of third person inflection *-s* absence in structures such as *She like school* or *The dog always like to eat*. The pattern of *-s* absence is one of the structures considered to be part of the common-core structures of AAE (cf. Labov 1972; Rickford 1999; Green 2002).

Again, we see a significant difference in the relative incidence of -*s* absence based on locale and generation. The black Appalachian communities of Texana and Beech Bottom obviously do not share this structural pattern to any great degree with the other African American communities; in fact, they tend to align with the regional white community, a finding confirmed by the examination of Southern Highland regional traits such as the use of -*s* on third-person plural forms in *The dogs barks* (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2004). As with *r*-lessness, the communities in coastal North Carolina (Princeville, Hyde County, Roanoke Island) show more internal and external variability for verbal -*s* absence. There is ample evidence demonstrating that AAE may show significant regional and generational variability from community to community.

In addition to our objective studies of regional AAE, we have recently conducted a series of perceptual experiments to tease out the intersection of ethnicity and regionality in dialect identification (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Thomas and Reaser 2004; Torbert 2004; Childs and Mallinson 2006). Listeners consistently misjudge the ethnic identity of African Americans from Appalachia and the Outer Banks (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2006), showing that regionality may trump ethnicity in listener perception of African Americans in some settings. These perceptual studies clearly support the objective evidence that regional features can take on first-order indexicality (Silverstein 2003; Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006) for African Americans, in which speakers are primarily identified as being from the coast or the mountains vis-à-vis with being African American. The evidence from speaker identification experiments, along with the cross-generational linguistic analysis of dialect features, supports the contention that both earlier varieties of English spoken by African Americans and contemporary varieties of AAE may indeed be quite regionalized.

There are several subtypes of regional variables that need to be recognized. First, there are traits that result from the accommodation of overarching regional varieties of English. These may range from local vowel systems (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Torbert 2004; Fridland et al. 2004) to regional morphosyntactic patterns (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2004; Mallinson 2006). This kind of accommodation often has the effect of perceptual misidentification (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2006; Torbert 2004). But there is also regional variability in terms of the features of AAE. Thus, we saw that the frequency level of third person singular -*s* absence ranged from more than 75% to less than 5%. And then there are cases where common-core features and regional features may converge, as in the case of *r*-lessness. That is, the linguistic trait is characteristic both of AAE and of some adjacent regional European American varieties where AAE exists. While *r*-lessness is commonly cited as a shared trait of AAE (Rickford 1999; Green 2002), it is obviously affected by regional context. In fact, the reinspection of some of the early studies of AAE reveals

that this was evident in the initial studies of AAE. For example, Labov et al.'s study of AAE in New York City (1968), a regional *r*-less context, shows levels of *r*-lessness that were nearly categorical, whereas Wolfram's study of AAE in Detroit, an *r*-full area, showed levels that were significantly lower for vernacular speakers (Wolfram 1969).

It should be noted that some linguists have been careful to observe the regional, temporal, and social heterogeneity of AAE, but this tends to be lost in the structural homogenization assumption that frames AAE description. Lisa Green, one of the few linguists who acknowledges in detail the regional delineation in AAE, notes:

> ... there are regional differences that will distinguish varieties of AAE spoken in the United States. For example, although speakers of AAE in Louisiana and Texas use very similar syntactic patterns, their vowel systems may differ. Speakers of AAE in areas in Pennsylvania also share similar syntactic patterns with speakers in Louisiana and Texas; however, speakers in areas in Pennsylvania are not likely to share some of the patterns that the Louisiana and Texas speakers share with other speakers of southern regions. (Green 2002: 1)

Unfortunately, Green's regional acknowledgement is the exception rather than the rule, and such qualification is all-too-often ignored in the presentation of AAE that follows the initial qualification. If regionality in earlier and contemporary AAE is evident, then the obvious question is why sociolinguists downplayed or ignored it, thus creating the illusion that regionality was irrelevant, or at best, incidental in the description of AAE.

The Language Change Myth

To some extent, the language change myth is related to the supraregional myth, although it also has a life of its own. If one assumes a uniform structure for AAE regardless of regional context, it is a relatively small step to the assumption that AAE has exhibited a unilateral path of change, as both interpretations appear to be fuelled by an underlying homogeneity assumption. The trajectory myth demonstrates how sociolinguists can actually disagree with one another while at the same time operating within the same epistemological paradigm established and perpetuated by the greater sociolinguistic enterprise.

Although sociolinguists have certainly argued vehemently among themselves about the trajectory of change in AAE, the dispute has typically been framed in terms of how AAE as a unitary variety may have altered its course of change over this period. In the 1980s, for example, leading researchers on AAE (Fasold et al. 1987) argued whether AAE was converging or diverging with vernacular white varieties over the twentieth century. Labov, the architect of the so-called 'divergence hypothesis,' observed that 'many important features of the modern dialect are creations of the twentieth century and not an inheritance of the nineteenth' (1998: 119). Guy Bailey, a strong proponent of the divergence hypothesis, noted further:

> . . . for quite a long period, the black and white vernaculars, at least in the South, were on paths of mutual convergence. Over the last seventy-five years, these varieties have been on paths of mutual divergence. (Bailey 1987: 76)

Other linguists argued against the evidence for the divergence hypothesis (e.g. Vaughn-Cooke 1987; Wolfram 1987), but their arguments still were based on the assumption that they could describe a uniform path of change for AAE. Rickford (1987; 1999), for example, pointed out that convergence and divergence may have taken place in AAE at different points in time, but did not include the possibility that they might take place in different varieties of AAE simultaneously.

Research on small, rural Southern communities has suggested that the common change assumption is an unwarranted generalization. In fact, the empirical evidence reveals at least three different trajectories of change, as indicated in Figure 4A–C. These include one that supports the divergence hypothesis (4A), one that supports the convergence hypothesis (4B), and one that shows a curvilinear trajectory that includes both periods of convergence and divergence over time (4C). The trajectory lines represent an approximation of usage levels for the inventory of features examined rather than a precise, composite measurement of the actual linguistic features found in analyses such as Wolfram and Thomas (2002), Wolfram (2003), Mallinson and Wolfram (2002), Childs and Mallinson (2004), Carpenter (2004, 2005), D'Andrea (2005), and Rowe (2005). Core AAE refers to features that have traditionally been associated with vernacular varieties of AAE, including inflectional -s absence, copula absence, prevocalic syllable-final cluster reduction, and so forth. Regional varieties used in the comparison (Outer Banks English, Appalachian English, regional European American English) refer to local dialects varieties typically associated with the European American population, although our analysis indicates that this ethnolinguistic demarcation is not completely justified. The labels on the x axis refer to different generations of speakers based on significant historical events; these include speakers born before World War I (for Hyde County), those born following World War I but before racial integration of public schools (pre-1960), those who attended school while integration was being implemented (1960–1975), and those who attended school following integration (after 1975).

These studies of change in apparent time show that a number of historical, demographic, and social factors need to be considered in explaining different trajectories of change. Factors include the regional setting, the size of the community, macro- and microsociohistorical events, patterns of contact with adjacent European American communities and with external African American communities, intracommunity social divisions, and cultural values and ideologies. The nature of linguistic variables is also a factor; different linguistic variables may follow diverse paths of change based on their linguistic composition and their sociolinguistic status.

For example, the Appalachian African American community in Beech Bottom is a very small, receding community that has been quite removed

(A) Regional Reduction and AAE Intensification: The Hyde County (Eastern NC) Trajectory
(adapted from Wolfram & Thomas 2002: 200)
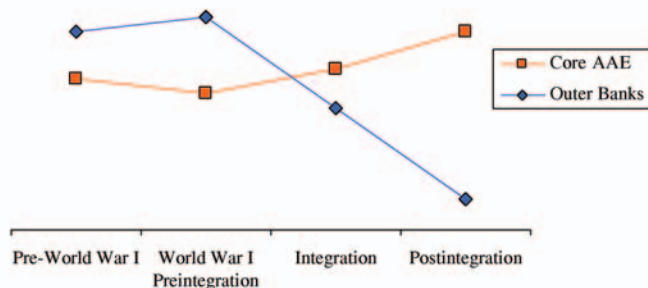
(B) AAE Reduction and Regional Dialect Maintenance: The Beech Bottom Trajectory (Appalachian NC) (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002)
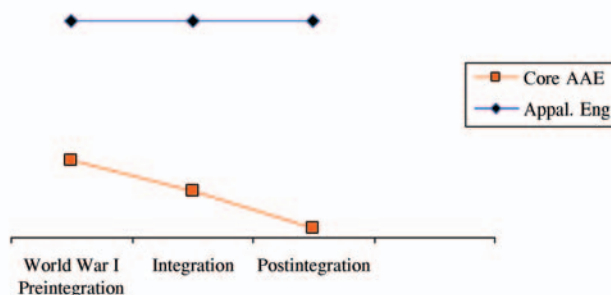
(C) The Curvilinear Model: Texana (Appalachian NC)/ Roanoke Island (Eastern NC) Trajectory (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Carpenter 2005)
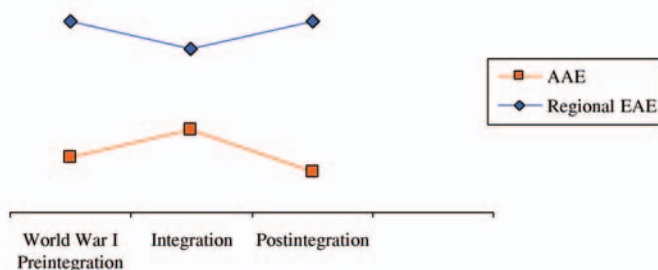
Fig. 4. Models of change in African American English (AAE). (A) Regional reduction and AAE intensification: the Hyde County (eastern NC) trajectory (adapted from Wolfram and Thomas 2002: 200). (B) AAE reduction and regional dialect maintenance: the beech bottom trajectory (Appalachian NC) (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002). (C) The curvilinear model: Texana (Appalachian NC)/Roanoke Island (Eastern NC) trajectory (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Carpenter 2005).

from other African American communities geographically and socially over the past half century. Furthermore, the few remaining members of the community self-report mixed ethnicity rather than African American identity although the older residents attended a segregated school established for

African Americans in the area (Mallinson 2004). Perhaps more importantly, residents show a value orientation that aligns with the surrounding European American culture (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Mallinson 2004). In this context, convergence seems quite understandable, and speakers are losing remnants of AAE as they fully accommodate the Appalachian English features of the European American dialect community.

In contrast, Hyde County has a long-term African American community of more than 2000 people that was once highly insulated from outside influences. At present, the younger community members indicate increasing social contact with external African American communities, and many youth reveal a kind of exocentric (i.e. community external) value orientation that accommodates urban cultural norms (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). In this context, once-entrenched regional dialect features of the Outer Banks dialect from almost three centuries of co-existence between African Americans and European Americans are rapidly receding and linguistic features associated with urban AAE are intensifying.

The cases of Texana and Roanoke Island, which show curvilinear paths of change, are somewhat more complicated by internal social divisions, particularly with respect to external values and norms. Thus, some middle-aged and younger speakers show shifts toward or away from AAE and the neighbouring European American variety that correlate with endocentric (i.e. community internal) and exocentric value orientations (Carpenter 2004, 2005; Carpenter and Hilliard 2005; Childs and Mallinson 2004, 2006; Mallinson 2006). Both of these communities are relatively small, but have differential patterns of external contact that provide choices between traditional rural and encroaching urban value orientations.

The reality of dialect change over time in different communities, both with reference to traditional regional linguistic traits and with reference to traits associated with AAE, shows no unilateral path in the change trajectories of AAE speakers. The homogeneity assumption simply cannot be applied to variation in AAE over time and place.

The Social Stratification Myth

Descriptions of vernacular AAE are often qualified by the fact that it is most commonly used by working-class speakers (Labov 1972; Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Rickford 1999; Green 2002). As Tracey Weldon observes (2004), there is a prevailing assumption among sociolinguists that AAE is not spoken by middle-class African Americans so that there is a fairly straightforward social dichotomy in the social stratification of vernacular AAE. Early in the study of AAE, the correlation of vernacular structures with social traits was set forth as follows:

> Social status is the single most important variable correlating with linguistic differences. Of the three individual scales which comprise the overall social status scale, the linguistic differentiation correlates more consistently with differences

on the education and occupation scales than with the residency scales. (Wolfram 1969: 214)

This assumption is predicated on a transparent correlation between demographically defined socioeconomic status and the use of vernacular AAE structures. Although there has been considerable discussion of an idealized distinction between standard and vernacular AAE (e.g. Spears 1999; Weldon 2004), the socioeconomic status assumption has largely flown under the radar of sociolinguistic critique. There has been surprisingly little empirical study of the social diversification of AAE use within the African American community while there has been an inordinate preoccupation with its canonized set of vernacular linguistic structures.

The results of Weldon's (2004) study of language by an accomplished group of African Americans who were part of a State of the Black Union Symposium aired on the television station C–SPAN is an important first step in examining a more representative spectrum of language use by African Americans across social strata and in different social settings. In particular, her study focuses on a group of prominent African Americans assembled in a church where they were speaking to a dual audience – the immediate, predominantly black audience gathered in the church and the predominantly white audience of C–SPAN viewers. Weldon's study exposes spurious dichotomies such as the nominal distinction between standard and vernacular African American English; it also raises questions about the role of personal presentation and audience in public speeches, including shifting styles, performative code switching, and the use of fossilized vernacular forms, that is, persistent vernacular variants that are used in more formal public settings with mainstream audiences that might seem to call for standard variants.

Our recent study (Kendall and Wolfram 2006) of social divisions within the African American community has moved away from traditional kinds of objective socioeconomic status indices used to rank subjects, focusing instead on the relative value of different linguistic varieties in different situations, in other words, on the 'linguistic marketplace' (Bourdieu 1991) that characterizes each particular community and impinges on different individuals in individual ways. We examined the speech of recognized African American community leaders and compared their public speech at town meetings and radio interviews with their speech during sociolinguistic interviews and in other interactional contexts. We also compared their speech with the norms for their age and gender cohorts from the community. A comparison of the use of vernacular structures by two community leaders, one the Mayor of Princeville (eastern North Carolina), the oldest town established by blacks in the USA, and one a County Commissioner from Roanoke Island, a longstanding Outer Banks black community surrounded by a European American population, show both similarities and differences. In Figure 5A and 5B (from Kendall and Wolfram 2006), we juxtapose a selected set of dialect features for the leaders, comparing their speech in the public addresses to that in the sociolinguistic interview. We also compare
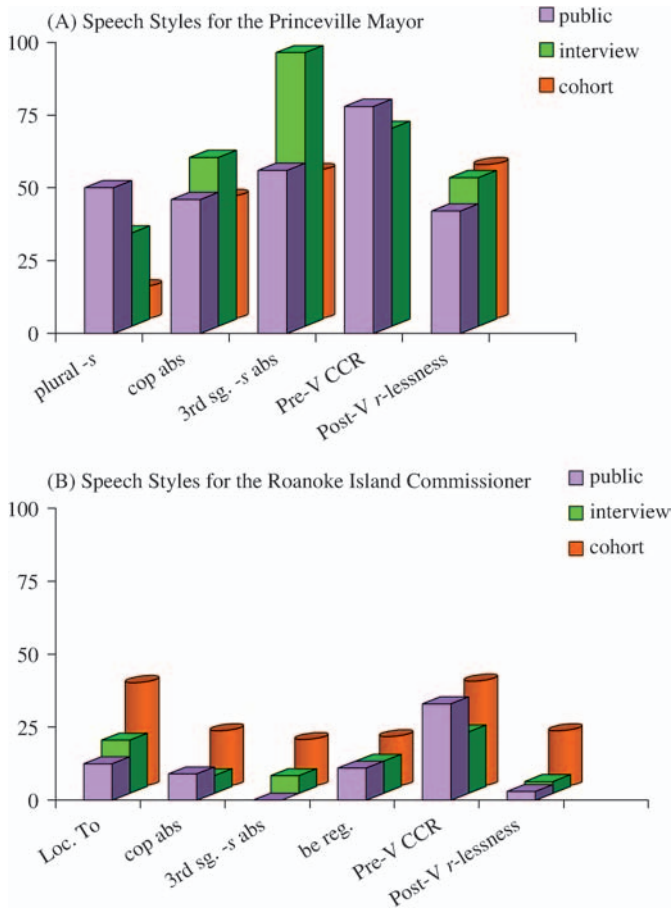
Fig. 5. Comparison of community leaders in Princeville and Roanoke Island. (A) Speech styles for the Princeville Mayor. (B) Speech styles for the Roanoke Island commissioner.

the speech in the sociolinguistic interview with the interview speech of speakers from their respective cohort age and gender groups. The linguistic variables examined include copula/auxiliary absence (e.g. *she nice*; *she acting nice*), verbal *-s* absence (e.g. *she go there*); prevocalic consonant cluster reduction (e.g. *wes' area*), and postvocalic *r*-lessness (*ca'* for *car*). For each community, a prominent local variable is also considered; in the case of Princeville, plural *-s* absence (Rowe 2005) as in *They have lots of car_* and in the case of Roanoke Island the use of *to* as a static locative (*She's to the store*) (Vadnais 2006).

   The comparison of the leaders from the disparate communities shows a wide range of language use in public presentations, from the predominant use of vernacular forms by the Princeville Mayor to the primary use of standard forms by the Roanoke Island Commissioner. Furthermore, the speech of local community leaders does not necessarily conform to age and

gender norms, but it deviates in quite different ways. In Princeville, the female Mayor is among the most vernacular speakers while in Roanoke Island, the female Commissioner is among the least vernacular speakers, although she still shows fossilized vestiges of vernacular forms. Part of this difference may be related to their local leadership roles and principal service constituencies. In Princeville, the Mayor's primary service community is centred on the local citizens of a predominantly black municipality that is obviously tolerant of local vernacular speech. The historical values of Princeville are largely endocentric, and most of the public speaking still occurs within the local, largely autonomous community setting. In fact, it might be hypothesized that vernacularity helps establish solidarity with local community members in Princeville. For sure, it does not exclude speakers from public office and community leadership roles that have marketplace status.

In contrast, the constituency of the Roanoke Island Commissioner is largely external to the black community – and has been for decades now given her role as a pioneering leader in a dominant white social order. The Commissioner could not, in fact, win any elected office without a significant white vote; in Princeville, there is no white vote to speak of. The differential contexts, community structures, and public constituencies thus correlate with the use of vernacular forms by respective community leaders rather than with traditional socioeconomic indices such as education or residency. Both speakers have college degrees and post-baccalaureate education, and live in comparable types of residencies within the community, yet their use of vernacular forms in public and private differs dramatically.

This brief investigation indicates that a host of community, contextual, social, and personal factors have to be taken into account in understanding the use of vernacular AAE forms and in explaining the public and non-public speech of community leaders in the rural African American South – and probably everywhere for that matter. The relative autonomy of the community, the primary public service constituency, the different social affiliations and divisions within the community, personal background and history, and the socialized demands in public presentation all seem to be factors in understanding the use of local vernacular and mainstream standard variants by these speakers. If nothing else, imagined dichotomies between middle-class and working-class speech and between standard and vernacular AAE speech must be reconsidered, along with unilateral explanations and simplistic assumptions about the social stratification of AAE within the community.

Constructing Sociolinguistic Folklore

Sociolinguists are not exempt from the creation of convenient myths as they overextend or generalize their claims beyond those justified by empirical evidence. As captured in the smartly phrased title of Reed, Doss, and Hurlbert's (1987) essay on folklore in social science, some claims just seem

'too good to be false'. Of course, prominent sociolinguistic researchers would not deliberately deceive or mislead their colleagues and students about the nature and development of AAE. Nevertheless, they appear to have unintentionally fashioned a set of exaggerated axioms that are now widely accepted and disseminated as sociolinguistic fact. In the initial stages of arguing for the linguistic integrity of AAE, it might have been understandable that sociolinguists would take a united stance as a kind of 'strategic essentialism' (Bucholtz 2003), in which they assumed a uniform position for the sake of sociopolitical opposition to folk theories of language diversity based on the principle of linguistic subordination. But such a stance should be considered as a temporary tactic, not a reified position. Bucholtz (2003: 403) observes:

> Given that the groups studied by sociolinguists are often marginalized politically, economically, and socially and hence may not even be recognized by the academy or by dominant society as legitimate subjects of research, strategic essentialism continues to be a necessary tool for both sociolinguists and the communities we study. In using this tool, however, researchers must remain mindful of the assumptions it brings along with it concerning 'real' language and 'authentic' speakers.

I would like to suggest that historical circumstance, social and professional enculturation, and academic exclusivity enabled at least several unwarranted conclusions to emerge as part of the AAE descriptive canon, and that it is now time to correct these questionable axioms.

The pioneering descriptive studies of AAE launched in the 1960s concentrated on non-Southern metropolitan areas despite the fact that the roots of contemporary AAE were established in the rural South (e.g. Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Legum et al. 1971; Fasold 1972; Labov 1972). In the history of AAE description, these studies set a precedent for the types of structures to be described in AAE for decades and they also established an accompanying interpretive perspective on the status of these structures. The initial focus on urban areas was not accidental, as there was a hypothesized link between AAE and significant social and educational problems that plagued these urban areas, including poverty and racial disparity in school performance. These problems affected large numbers of a rapidly growing urban African American population; in fact, early studies of AAE such as Labov's landmark study in Harlem (Labov et al. 1968) and Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley's study of Detroit speech (1967) were funded by the US Office of Education because of the concern for an apparent correlation between vernacular speech and low educational achievement. To some extent, this focus set the stage for the preoccupation with vernacular structures and basilectal versions of AAE, leading to a kind sociolinguistic nostalgia for the authentic vernacular speaker (Bucholtz 2003). Without a doubt, the focus of these studies made an essential and significant contribution in terms of the goals that inspired these studies. This contribution is not disputed here; what is contested is the reification of a set of axioms about AAE and its speakers that are not validated by the data.

The effect of the Northern, urban vernacular sampling bias was not always recognized in the emerging canon of AAE description, nor was it adequately acknowledged that these communities were often transplant Southern communities from different regions of the South. In fact, the majority of middle-aged and older speakers in many Northern cities were still first-generation Southern in-migrants, and it was often difficult to find enough older, lifetime residents in these urban contexts for sociolinguistic interviews (e.g. Wolfram 1969). In these urban contexts, patterns reflective of migration from different rural regions of the South would be conveniently overlooked given the emerging focus on shared vernacular structures. Furthermore, change in apparent time might be viewed quite differently in an urban Northern transplant community than in a longstanding small Southern rural community. The Northern context of AAE, although perhaps highly significant for social, educational, and political reasons at that time, was hardly representative of the full range of the AAE-speaking population, particularly the rural South where it was originally rooted and nurtured historically in quite localized settings.

Not all of the explanation for AAE sociolinguistic folklore, however, can be explained simply by historical circumstances and sampling bias. Linguists were understandably intrigued by the fact that the uniformity of the core features of AAE seemed to support the primacy of ethnicity over regionality in demarcating a dialect boundary, a finding quite different from the primacy of regional dialect boundaries in European American varieties suggested by linguistic atlas projects (e.g. Kurath 1949; Kurath & McDavid 1961); in fact, this conclusion seemed extraordinary in light of the traditional focus of dialectology on determining geographical boundaries. Although linguists and sociolinguists would no doubt maintain that all dialects are of equal interest and value, they are hardly immune from 'the exotic language syndrome', where varieties that are structurally and socially most different in terms of the linguist's previous experience hold particular intrigue. Certainly, the exaggerated interest that AAE has received over the last half century would bear out this fixation; Schneider reports that African American English has more than five times as many publications devoted to it than any other variety of American English from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s and more than twice as many as all other ethnic varieties combined (1996: 3).

On a more racially sensitive level, it might be pointed out that the early studies that established the tradition of AAE studies were largely carried out by Northern, white (male) linguists who would less likely be attuned to intra- and inter-community variation. Furthermore, they would not be exempt from the biracial socialization of American society that leads to overgeneralization and the illusion of ethnic homogeneity. Bonfiglio observes (2002: 62–3):

> The illusion of homogeneity is largely a function of secondary revision that glosses over differences and constructs a linear metanarrative, an overgeneralization that suppresses differences and unites the percepts in a structure of wish-fulfillment;

i.e. there is something in the popular consciousness that desires to see a unity of geography, ethnicity, and language.

As noted earlier, some linguists (e.g. Spears 1999; Green 2002; Weldon 2004) have explicitly recognized the regional, temporal, and social heterogeneity of AAE, but this has typically been ignored or trivialized in the structural homogenization assumption that frames the vast majority of AAE descriptions. This treatment by sociolinguists is, however, often at odds with the observations of community members. Regular comments by participants in our studies of Southern rural AAE speak clearly to the regionality of AAE in the rural southeastern USA. For example, interviews for a recent production of a documentary on regional and ethnic varieties of North Carolina (e.g. Hutcheson 2005) elicited a number of unprompted comments about regional differences, both in terms of overarching regional accommodation and in terms of internal variation within AAE. An African American from the foothills of Appalachia notes:

> They'd say, 'Say "honey chil", because I would always – it's just a part of my language, 'honey child', because I talk just like the people at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountain, with that kind of twang and that kind of thing, and so that was just a part of me.' [quoted from 70-year-old female in *Voices of North Carolina* (Hutcheson 2005)].

By the same token, an African American resident of Durham, North Carolina, who travels widely throughout the state, comments on regional differences within vernacular AAE:

> . . . inside the African American community, when you go from region to region there're really different voices and sounds. You can tell the difference between an African American who lives in Northeast [North Carolina] 'cause they say "skraight", which is not something you'd hear in Durham, or you'd hear in Winston Salem, or you'd hear in Fayetteville, but if you hear "skraight" or "skreet", you know exactly where they came from.' [quoted from a 50 – 60-year-old female in *Voices of North Carolina* (Hutcheson 2005)].

Given the commonness of such comments by community members, it might be asked why most sociolinguists [Dennis Preston and his colleagues (Preston & Niedzielski 2000; Preston 2006) are the clear exception] have tended to ignore or dismiss such types of observations. Perhaps one reason is 'authoritative entextualization' (Johnson 2001), in which professional sociolinguists tune out non-professional observation and opinion, dumping them into the recycle bin of popular folklore. In the process of constructing their axioms about AAE, sociolinguists appear to have developed a socialized immunity against popular interpretations and community voice about AAE. With some justification, linguists do not have a high regard for lay observations about language differences, but in this instance the linguist-knows-best attitude may have deprived the field of valid observations about the status of AAE in time and place. I must confess that many of my early presentations on AAE to racially mixed audiences were met with objections

by African Americans about a definition of AAE that seemed inattentive to social and regional variation within the African American population. In retrospect, my ethnographic disregard for such comments reflected a kind of linguistic exclusivity and academic elitism that deprived our sociolinguistic studies of potentially insightful observations.

Finally, there seems to be a quest for professional consensus on AAE. Sociolinguistic unanimity on the linguistic integrity of AAE is certainly to be commended, but professional linguists need to be careful not to overextend a harmonious authoritative voice to other dimensions of AAE study. The united stance that linguists took in controversial public debates about AAE may have lulled them into assuming that it was appropriate to speak in a common voice about the structural status and variation of AAE in time and place, even though some of their claims were not empirically justified or professionally reasonable. At the same time, there has been vociferous disagreement about the historical origin and development of AAE over time. Given the complexity of the data and the range of settings and circumstances contextualizing the African American population in the USA, there is no reason why sociolinguists should be expected to take a unified stance about the development, distribution, and even the very definition of AAE. In the early treatments of AAE (Labov et al. 1968; Fasold & Wolfram 1970), it was assumed that a unitary variety could be defined in terms of a shared core of structural features, but recent research presented here has called into question this assumption. Current research has targeted reliable listener identification of ethnicity that may rely on prosodic cues as much as or more than the segmental structural traits identified by earlier sociolinguistic discussions (Thomas 2002; Thomas & Reaser 2004). Listener identification tasks also indicate that ethnic identification for some African American speakers is gradient rather than discrete. Although sociolinguists have tended to agree that AAE constitutes a variety, there is no consensus definition, only a shared belief that it exists. It is time to revisit our foundational definition of AAE so that we do not unwittingly perpetuate the notion that AAE is a unitary language variety whose features and functions are quite transparent to linguists and speakers of American English. The base definition of AAE should not be exempt from critical scrutiny any more than the axioms that have been considered with respect to its temporal and regional configuration. Convenient but unjustified axioms do not serve sociolinguists in the study of AAE any better than a misinformed understanding and folk theories of AAE serve the public at large, and it is now time to subject some of our conventionally accepted sociolinguistic wisdom on the status of AAE to more exacting empirical scrutiny.

Short Biography

Walt Wolfram is William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor at North Carolina State University, where he also directs the North Carolina Language

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