Teaching and Learning Guide for: Phonological and Phonetic Characteristics of African American Vernacular English

Erik R. Thomas
North Carolina State University


Author’s Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and, more generally, African American English (AAE) are the most heavily studied group of dialects in North American English. Much of the enquiry has focused on morphosyntactic variation, but a significant amount has dealt with phonological and phonetic variables. Linguistic variables that can set AAE off from local European American varieties (EAE) in a given community span every realm of phonology and phonetics. Consonantal variables such as non-rhoticity, consonant cluster simplification, and th-stopping have attracted a great deal of attention. These variables usually involve phonological alternations, but phonotactic constraints also occur. Vowel variables, such as the degree of fronting of the GOAT vowel, are gaining some attention, mostly to address how closely local AAE varieties approach local EAE forms. Prosody has received some study and voice quality a small amount. Study of these variables is used to address several theoretical and applied issues. Among the most important theoretical issues are the Creolist/Anglicist controversy, over the origins of AA(V)E; the convergence/divergence controversy, over whether AAVE is becoming more or less like EAE vernaculars; and, recently, the uniformity controversy, concerning the degree of uniformity or diversity within AAE across the United States. Applied issues have focused largely on educational policy: whether or not AAE variants hinder learning for African American schoolchildren and to what extent AAE variants can be incorporated into classroom instruction.

The Author Recommends


Bailey provides a table with 45 phonological and phonetic variables known to be correlated either with AAE (for the majority of them) or with Southern White Vernacular English, giving an approximate date for each one. He focuses on the history of AAE in the South, explaining how agriculture and the expansion of slavery were interconnected.
in the antebellum South. He also lists some corpora of African Americans’ recordings of historical value.


This study was the first systematic community investigation into vowel shifting in AAE. Fridland finds that African Americans in Memphis showed nearly all of the vowel shifts comprising the ‘Southern Shift’, although usually not to the most extreme degrees found among whites in Memphis. Younger whites seemed to be pulling back from the extreme forms, while young African Americans did not show an analogous development. She relates the findings to social network patterns.


This chapter provides an overview and some detail about many of the important consonantal variables relevant to African American English. Some of these variables, such as r-lessness, are well-studied, while others, such as /skr/ for /str/, are lesser known. In addition, there is a discussion of Green’s work on the intonation of yes/no questions in AAE.


This investigation is a classic study and one that helped launch the intensive analysis of AAE that has followed in the years since its publication. It examined a range of consonantal variables: r-lessness, /l/ deletion, substitutions for /θ/ and /ð/, and consonant cluster simplification. It also established methods for analysing each of these variables. Emphasis was placed on the role of social networks in the degree to which variants associated with AAE occurred.


Volume One, Handbook.
Volume Six, Social Matrix.
Volume Seven, Social Pattern.

The *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* (LAGS) is an unfortunately neglected treasure trove of information about AAE in the South. Phonological, phonetic, and lexical incidence variables are all included, along with morphosyntactic and lexical ones. Information can be found about phonetic variation for all vowels and most consonants. Volume 1 provides descriptions of each subject who was interviewed. Volumes 6 and 7 provide
breakdowns by social groupings, including race, for a very large number of variables. The main stumbling block for most potential users is that the presentation style is somewhat opaque. Users have to refer to the introduction to each volume to understand what the tables and maps represent and to see the total number of subjects included in each cell in the tables. The rather daunting layout was a consequence of the need to compress huge amounts of data into the most concise format. Nevertheless, it is well worth a researcher’s time to learn how to use LAGS.


Although its analyses of AAE are limited to a few illustrative examples, this book should be crucial for future studies of AAE because it demonstrates how to analyse phonetic variables using current techniques from experimental phonetics. It covers both production and perception, and methods for examining segmental, prosodic, and voice quality variables, as well as ways of relating them to cognition. Numerous variables in AAE are unstudied, but this guidebook opens the door to analysis of them. Future progress in understanding AAE will depend on being able to explore such variables.


Another classic study that followed close on the heels of Labov et al. (1968), this examination has been just as important as a point of comparison for later studies. It examined r-lessness, substitutions for /θ/, consonant cluster simplification, and devoicing of final /d/ and provided a systematic method for quantifying each one. Its emphasis on constructing socially comparable samples of African Americans and European Americans demonstrated that variants associated with AAE really were ethnic variables and not merely social class variables.


- Chapter 2, Vowel phonology and ethnicity in North Carolina, by Christine Mallinson, Becky Childs, and Jeannine Carpenter, pp. 23–47.
- Chapter 4, African American Vernacular English: Vowel phonology in a Georgia community, by Claire Andres and Rachel Votta, pp. 75–98.
- Chapter 6, African American and white vowel systems in Pittsburgh, by Maeve Eberhardt, pp. 129–57.
- Chapter 7, Convergence in blue-collar Columbus, Ohio, African American and white vowel systems?, by David Durian, Robin Dodsworth, and Jennifer Schumacher, pp. 161–90.
This collection of articles explores the Uniformity Controversy. Each chapter covers a
different urban centre or collection of rural locales covering widely scattered locations in
the United States. It is shown that AAE exhibits considerable geographic diversity, both
within the South and outside it. At the same time, a core of AAE features emerges, even
though different communities maintain or discard different core features.

**Online Materials**

cal.org/topics/dialects/aae.html
   The most important features of this site are its links to an extensive bibliography on
   AAE, to other online resources, and to discussions of literary uses of AAE.

   ammem/collections/voices/title.html
   The Library of Congress website now has all the known sound recordings of African
   Americans born as slaves. The recordings can be downloaded free of charge as well.
   Information about the recording medium and the circumstances of each interview are
   provided, as are transcripts.

   http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~patrickp/AAVE.html
   This website focuses on the controversies surrounding AA(V)E, especially with regard
to education. It also has links to a bibliography of AAE and to course syllabi related to
   AAE.

   Pollock’s website lists many phonological features of AAE, with illustrations of each.
   The list is not exhaustive, and much of it is based either on Pollock’s research or on
   Guy Bailey’s publications.

**Focus Questions**

1. What phonological and phonetic evidence provides information relevant to the creo-
   list/Anglicist controversy?
2. What phonological and phonetic evidence provides information relevant to the diver-
   gence/convergence controversy?
3. What phonological and phonetic evidence provides information relevant to the unifor-
   mity controversy?
4. How have migration patterns shaped the pronunciation of African American English?
5. How has the traditional focus on consonantal variation shaped our view of AAE, and
   how might analysis of vowels and prosody change that view?
6. Why does AAE need to be approached differently in the South than in cities outside
   the South?
7. How might pronunciation features of AAE relate to classroom instruction procedures?
   To what extent does the impact of different pronunciation features differ in this
   regard?
Sample Syllabus

- Controversies in AAE
  - Creolist/Anglicist Controversy
  - Uniqueness Controversy
  - Divergence/Convergence Controversy
  - Uniformity Controversy
  - Educational applications
  - Ethnic profiling and auditory identification of African American speech

- Phonological and Phonetic Variation in AAE
  - Consonantal Variation in AAE
    - The classic variables: r-lessness, consonant cluster simplification, and substitutions for /θ/ and /ð/
    - Other consonantal variables
    - Phonological processes in AAE
    - Methods of quantifying consonantal variables
    - Consonants and the Creolist/Anglicist and Uniqueness Controversies
    - Relationship of consonantal variation in AAE to social status
  - Vocalic Variation in AAE
    - Vowel shifting patterns: Southern Shift, African American Shift, relations to other vowel shifts
    - Vowels and the Divergence/Convergence and Uniformity Controversies
  - Prosodic and Voice Quality Variation in AAE
    - How important are they to demarcating AAE?
    - How can they be explored?

- Historical developments in AAE
  - The Old South: What did earlier AAE sound like?
    - What does Gullah tell us?
    - Evidence from dialect geography
    - Evidence from current rural studies
  - The New South: Rise of mill towns and its effects on African American life
  - The Great Migration: urban life moves to the fore
  - What effect will social differences have on the future development of AAE?