

Is there a supra-regional African American Dialect, and if not why not? **Malcah Yaeger-Dror, University of Arizona**

Sociolinguists in the US have consistently maintained that there is a supra-regional set of dialect features for AAE (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Labov *et al* 2006), based on morpho-syntactic dialect features. However, very little work had been done on phonology (Labov, *et al* 2006; Yaeger & Thomas *forthc.*).

Wolfram (2007) was first to recognize that a more in depth analysis of phonology might reveal that our basic premises are faulty, and we determined to carry out a systematic analysis of vowel systems of cities in the 'urban diaspora' of AAE speakers. This paper reports evidence of variation in the vowel phonology of African American English (AAE) speakers who live in five cities (New York, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Houston), two suburbs (Atlanta and Columbus) and two Southern rural areas (Louisiana and NC).

As we have begun to direct students to the study of the vowel phonology of African American speakers and compare these speakers with other local residents we have discovered that the conventional understanding has been flawed. This paper will present results of the analysis of the vowel systems of both AAE and other local residents who are demographically similar to the African American speakers, but belong to the dominant ethnic community for each of the cities considered. Our focus will be on determining the extent to which the vowel phonology of the African American speakers remains distinct from or accommodates to the local dialects in specific large metropolitan centers with major residential segregation of African Americans. Each of the cities chosen as a case study has unique linguistic and residential characteristics that will permit a triage of relevant internal (dialect) and external (social and social psychological) factors and how they influence the trajectory of vowel change, and of convergence toward (and divergence from) a regional vernacular dialect.

Given that most of the divergent/centripetal force of large African American communities is tied to urban culture (e.g., Alim 2004) an expanded focus on large urban areas is critical, particularly cities in which the African American community has only developed its own identity since World War II: Has AAE ethnolinguistic identity triggered linguistic isolation, can specific settlement patterns or segregation be shown to disallow convergence to the local vowel phonology, or do we find that the African American community shares a vowel phonology with the larger community? The community demographics and matrix dialect of each of these communities differ radically from each other, providing an array of linguistic and social variables to compare when analyzing whether African Americans really share more linguistic characteristics with each other than with regional reference groups.

REFERENCES

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[Wolfram, Walt \(1969\) *A sociolinguistic description of Detroit Negro speech*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.](#)
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without NSF funding for work in several of these communities, and the willingness of the student researchers to work in tandem with us. Detailed acknowledgement of the students' contributions will preface the paper.