Rethinking AAE research:
The use of postvocalic /r/ by two groups of black New Yorkers

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Within sociolinguistics, there is a growing body of research on the linguistic heterogeneity of black people in the United States, which at one time was sorely underestimated (Spears 1998). This research shows that African American English (AAE) varies both regionally, as well as across social categories like gender and socioeconomic class (Stanback 1986; Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2008). The present study goes one step further and examines the role of ethnicity (African American vs. Caribbean American), as well as generation, in conditioning linguistic behavior and creating social differentiation. We examine the use of postvocalic /r/ in the English of second-generation black Caribbeans in New York, and compare it to that of African American New Yorkers, with whom they are often identified racially, socially, and linguistically.

AAE has traditionally been considered an /r/-less dialect, however recent studies show increases in its rate of postvocalic /r/-fullness (Pollock & Berni 1996; Blake et al. 2006). Likewise, in the English of white New Yorkers, /r/-fullness has been on a steady increase over the last 40 years (Fowler 1986, Becker 2008). This study investigates the use of postvocalic /r/ among African Americans with U.S.-born parentage and second-generation Caribbean Americans, to determine how these groups differ from one another, and from white New Yorkers. We analyze the speech of 16 speakers, using interviews conducted by trained fieldworkers from the respective communities. Our results indicate that Caribbean American-identified blacks have higher rates of /r/-fullness than African American-identified blacks. Moreover, although there is an emergence of /r/-fullness in NYC AAE generally, it does not appear to be a change in progress, rather a change over one’s lifespan which is motivated by the linguistic marketplace. In the end, we challenge categories such as “African American” and even “AAE”, recognizing the often missed complexities.

References