The Transition Generation

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During the 20th century African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the rural community of Springville, Texas underwent a fundamental linguistic change, shifting from a rural to an urban vernacular like those documented in large cities. The transition involved the loss of some older features, the expansion of others, and the emergence of innovative features. While apparent time distributions of innovative and recessive features in Springville AAVE show a typical S curve and suggest a gradual evolution of features, those apparent time distributions also mask some chaotic processes that underlie the changes taking place. This paper examines those processes through an analysis of the use of verbal -s by a generation we label “the transition generation.”

The transition generation, which includes residents born between 1930-1950, people who grew up around the time of WWII, is a linguistic anomaly. Unlike the generations that precede and follow it, this cohort shows a significant amount of unstructured variation in its use of some AAVE features undergoing change. The best example is verbal -s. Apparent time distributions of 3rd singular -s in Springville suggest its gradual loss over time: the oldest residents use -s about 18% of the time, while the youngest residents use it less than 10% of the time. The situation within the transition generation is quite chaotic: the frequency of -s actually increases in 3rd singular, but it simultaneously increases throughout the paradigm as well. This overall increase in the use of -s is apparently a response to the weakening of earlier constraints on verbal -s. As those constraints disappear, speakers use -s haphazardly across the paradigm as they sort out its function. However, the initial loss of constraints doesn’t lead immediately to the disappearance of -s, but rather to a chaotic increase in its use, with the loss of -s following the loss of the constraints on its use.