

Urban and Rural AAE Vowels in North Carolina: A Supra-Regional Shift and Regional Accommodation

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Recent work has demonstrated significant variation in vowel systems of African American English (AAE) (Yaeger-Dror & Thomas, forthcoming; Wolfram & Thomas 2002). The extent of this variation motivates several broad questions, including 1) whether AAE vowel systems show features of regional White vowels, and 2) what distinguishes urban and rural AAE vowels in a single region.

This study addresses both questions via acoustic analysis of the vowels of 35 AAE speakers in (urban) Raleigh, NC and (rural) Warren County, NC. We examine the front vowels – BEET, BIT, BAIT, BET, BAT, and BAN – as well as BOAT, searching for evidence of both the Southern Shift (Labov 1991) and the hypothesized African American Shift (Thomas 2007), wherein the front lax vowels raise. 20 White Raleigh speakers are included for comparison.

The front lax vowels all show a single pattern: in general linear models with age, sex, and urban vs. rural as independent variables, normalized F1 at the midpoint is **not** significantly different between urban and rural AAE speakers, but the midpoints are significantly **higher** for AAE than for White speakers (BAT and BIT: $p=.000$; BET: $p<.01$), as predicted by Thomas (2007). However, the urban and rural AAE speakers differ in one respect: for rural speakers only, the BET and BAIT normalized F1 are not significantly different at the midpoint, and are reversed for one speaker. BIT and BEET are significantly different for both urban and rural AAE ($p<.001$ for both). Neither the urban nor rural AAE speakers show change in the BOAT nucleus across apparent time, whereas the White speakers show increased fronting.

The results are consistent with the hypothesis that AAE varieties blend supra-regional AAE features – in this case, raised front lax vowels – with features of regional White varieties (Southern-shifted BET and BAIT, but not BOAT).

References

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