Back Vowel Fronting in Pittsburgh AAE

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Fronting of the back vowels BOAT and BOOT is occurring across the U.S. (Thomas, 2001; Labov et al., 2006), among both White and ethnic minority speakers in several communities (Fought, 1999; Durian et al., forthcoming). Thomas (2001, 2007) notes that in general, Whites tend to show more fronting than African Americans of these vowels, but this is not universally the case (Wolfram & Thomas, 2002; Anderson, 2008). The fronting of these back vowels has thus far proven to be an interesting area within the study of regional varieties of African American English, particularly in terms of ethnic, regional, and linguistic influences converging towards explanation (Fridland & Bartlett, 2006).

Previous research in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has shown that African Americans and Whites share some features of the local phonological system, but retain distinct ethnolinguistic boundaries for others (Eberhardt, 2008, 2009). The current paper uses data from sociolinguistic interviews conducted with African Americans (born 1926-1993) to examine the extent to which the fronting of BOAT and BOOT is found across ethnic lines in the city. Preliminary results indicate that fronting of BOAT parallels the local dominant dialect, particularly among younger women, but the (more recent) fronting of BOOT is less advanced. In explaining these findings, I explore the possibility that the two vowels are infused with different social meanings, leading to this differential patterning within the local African American community.

References
Fridland, Valerie, & Bartlett, Kathy. 2006. The social and linguistic conditioning of back vowel fronting across ethnic groups in Memphis, Tennessee. English Language and Linguistics, 10, 1-22.