Trajectories of Change in Childhood and Adolescent African American English:
A Longitudinal Perspective

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Despite the robust descriptive research tradition on African American English (AAE), there has been relatively little attention to the longitudinal trajectory of vernacular AAE structures during childhood and adolescence. Van Hofwegen and Wolfram (2008), based on a pilot case study of 8 children at six temporal data points (48 months through Grade 10), hypothesized that there were four possible trajectories of optimal vernacular AAE use: (1) a pre-K period; (2) a steady course of use/non-use; (3) a curvilinear pattern in which early vernacular use recedes during childhood and then intensifies again during adolescence; and (4) a cyclic pattern in which vernacular use ebbs and flows through childhood and adolescence. The current analysis examines these hypothesized trajectories based on an expanded set of African American subjects (30) from a unique dataset of speakers who have been followed from birth through age 17 to determine dominant trajectories and the external and internal variables that might help account for differential patterns of change.

Complementary methods of assessing AAE use are applied to the speech samples at six temporal points, including token-based methods that employ a type of Dialect Density Measure (Renn 2006; Craig and Washington 2006), a type-based measure (Oetting & McDonald 2002; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2008) based on the use of different AAE structures, and variable-based measure (Tagliamonte 2006) that considers relative frequency levels of structures. The analysis indicates systematic, alternative trajectories, with favored trajectories being the pre-K optimal period and the curvilinear pattern. It also indicates that particular linguistic structures (e.g., –s 3rd sg. absence vs. copula absence) may show different trajectories. Finally, it shows a high correlation between the three types of assessment measures. External factors such as school racial density, peer associations, and self-regard indices help explain differential trajectories of AAE use during childhood and adolescence.

References