One of the commonly held assumptions in sociolinguistics over the last few decades has been the generalization that speakers of African American English have not been participating in the sound changes defining the major urban dialects of the U.S., such as Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, or New York City. As a result, AAE sounds different from the dialects of the white population in each of those cities, and the two ethnic varieties may continue to be diverging further (Labov & Harris 1986). At the same time, AAE is supposedly uniform across the non-Southern urban areas of the U.S., forming an ethnic variety with little regional variation. This claim has been challenged recently (e.g. Wolfram 2007; Thomas 2007), suggesting that a more in-depth analysis of AAE phonology might reveal that this basic premise was no longer valid.

This study contributes to the divergence debate by investigating the degree to which African Americans participate in the sound changes currently in progress in the dialect of Charleston, South Carolina. It is based on a sample of 60 African Americans native to the area, recorded during sociolinguistic interviews. Forty-three of the interviews were conducted by African American interviewers; seventeen were conducted by a Caucasian speaker of British English. Spontaneous speech from the sociolinguistic interviews is supplemented with word-list reading and minimal-pair tests.

This paper focuses on two sets of sound changes found earlier in the white population, the advanced fronting of the back upgliding vowels /uw/ and /ow/, as in two, goose, and so, goat, respectively (Baranowski 2008), and a number of vocalic mergers (Baranowski forthcoming), and compares the progress of the changes in the two populations. It reports on the results of minimal-pair tests for 60 speakers and the acoustical analysis of the vowel systems of a subset of 25 speakers.

The oldest generation of African American Charlestonians shares the most distinctive feature of the traditional dialect with the oldest white speakers, i.e. monophthongal and ingliding long mid vowels, with very back nuclei of /ow/, as in so, goat, etc. The younger generations of African Americans in Charleston have lost the inglides and show some fronting of the nuclei, though not to the same extent as the white population. African Americans appear to be acquiring the pin--pen merger and the cot--caught merger, but are more conservative in the unmerging of the fear--fair merger found in the traditional Charleston dialect, now largely unmerged in the white population.