African American English (AAE) and regional white varieties of American English are often considered to be distinctive language varieties (Rickford 1999; Green 2002), which vary from one another according to social circumstances that facilitate or hinder degrees of contact between whites and African Americans in localities across the U.S. (Wolfram 1974; Fasold 1981; Bailey and Bass 1986; Cukor Avila 2001, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). When examining the social circumstances that facilitate dialect similarity and linguistic norms across speaker samples, it is also instructive to consider the extent to which individual speakers in situations of inter-racial/ethnic contact come to adopt features distinctive from the dialects of their homes and ethno-racial groups. This paper examines the use of morphosyntactic and phonological features locally associated with AAE among white women with significant social, kinship, and residential contact with African Americans in Columbus, Ohio. It also seeks to isolate the significance of one strand of the multitude of factors that shape an individual’s linguistic practices: the age of acquisition (AoA) of one’s second dialect.

Linguistic data is obtained from sociolinguistic interviews and interactive speech data from 14 white adult female speakers who participate in similar types of social networks, but differ from one another with regard to their use of morphosyntactic and phonological features associated with AAE and the ages at which they began to have significant contact with native speakers of AAE. The impact of AoA of AAE is considered in a qualitative inventory and analysis of subjects’ use of morphosyntactic features distinctive to AAE in the regional context, including 3rd person singular –s absence, copula absence, stressed and unstressed BIN, habitual be, and negative inversion. A significant negative correlation is shown between speakers’ AoA and the qualitative range of distinctive AAE features they use, such that the lower the speaker’s age of acquisition, the wider the range of AAE morphosyntactic features used, \( r(12) = -0.68, p. <.01 \). The impact of AoA is also considered with regard to speakers’ use of multiple phonological features locally distinctive to AAE, including substitution of initial and medial fricatives, deletion of word-final of nasals, and consonant cluster reduction. Speakers who have the highest rates and widest range of phonological features associated with AAE also have the earliest AoA of the language variety, \( r(12) = -0.51, p. <.03 \).

While the speaker sample as a whole shows us that AoA is indeed predictive of adult use of AAE features, one speaker in the sample with a relatively late AoA of AAE, Jesse, shows greater rates and ranges of use of AAE phonological features than would be expected according to the second dialect acquisition literature (Payne 1976; Trugil 1986; Chambers 1988; Kerswill 1994; Ivars 1994; Omdal 1994; Siegel 2010). Although somewhat of an anomaly to SDA theory as well within the speaker sample, Jesse’s linguist behaviors ultimately encourage us to consider the particular social factors beyond AoA that help to support successful second dialect attainment and use in adulthood in situations of social and linguistic contact within a community with somewhat polarized ethno-racial boundaries.