Composite Dialect Indexes Confront Variationism: The Case of AAE
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Conventional variationist study focuses on particular linguistic structures (e.g., CCR, copula deletion, rlessness) on a variable-by-variable analysis, choosing to ignore issues of overall dialect use. Understandably, linguists are cautious about assessing dialect use on a composite dialect scale such as a Dialect Density Measure (DDM) (Craig and Washington 2006; Renn 2010). Linguistic description typically focuses on structural systems rather than inventories of unrelated traits (Terry 2004; Green 2011). Furthermore, not all structural traits are weighted equally in indexing ethnolinguistic repertoires (cf. ‘habitual be’ in my ears be itching vs. syllable-coda cluster reduction (e.g. wes’en’). Finally, a half-century of variationist study has demonstrated that dialect differentiation is often determined by the relative frequency with which particular variants are used in relation to their potential occurrence (e.g. Labov 1966; Tagliamonte 2006).

Notwithstanding the limitations of composite dialect indexes, there appears to be some heuristic analytical and descriptive justification for objectifying dialect use in terms of an overall dialect ranking. In allied fields such foreign language study, language proficiency in a second language is typically measured on such composite scales with good construct and concurrent validity (Kelley et al. 2003), and in speech pathology, language development is routinely measured in terms of composite indexes. For purposes of sociolinguistic analysis, such scales can conveniently serve as a basis for correlating dialect use with an array of social, psychological, and education variables.

This presentation considers the utility of composite dialect indexes by comparing several different approaches to AAE assessment based on a unique, longitudinal language study of 70 African American subjects during their early lifespan. In earlier analyses (Van Hofwegen and Wolfram 2010), six temporal data points (from 48 months through age 17) were analyzed; in this phase, a post-secondary period is added that includes extensive sociolinguistic and metalinguistic interviews for each speaker. The analysis compares a token-based measure in which the incidence of AAE features is calculated in terms of features per utterance or word to calculate a Dialect DDM (Craig and Washington 2007; Renn 2007, 2010), a type-based calculation in which the incidence of different representative AAE structures is calculated per word or utterance, and a conventional variation analysis in which actual and potential use of particular features is calculated. A regression analysis shows that there is a high correlation between the token-based and type-based analyses. Though there is some convergence in the structure-specific variation analysis and the overall measures, there are also differences sensitive to structural feature and age. Ironically, DDMs show a higher correlation with traditional variation analysis for the post-adolescent stage vis-à-vis the earlier stages of childhood for which they were constructed. The comparison of different models for assessing AAE demonstrates the heuristic utility of composite measures for the correlation of language use with external social and educational factors, for example, age, mother’s use of AAE, peer’s use of AAE, scores on educational achievement tests, and so forth. The investigation further underscores the need for analytical and descriptive triangulation in providing an authentic picture of AAE use.