Variation in agreement in Princeville African American English

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African American English (AAE) differs from Mainstream American English (MAE) in many aspects of grammar and phonology. This study focuses on a socially salient syntactic variable—the presence or absence of agreement/verbal -s marking on verbs with 3rd person singular subjects in the speech of AAE speakers from the town of Princeville North Carolina (original data from Rowe (2005)).

Existing accounts of AAE agreement have argued that it represents either hypercorrection (Labov et al., 1968) or an effect of historical reflex of a different agreement system such those found in Northern English dialects (Poplack and Tagliamonte, 2001). The analysis presented here explores the patterns of agreement in terms of differences from a prescriptive Mainstream American English (MAE) as well as in terms of the grammatical constraints driving the distribution of verbal -s marking, independent of prescriptive norms, evaluating the effect of community-internal speech norms in addition to external prescriptive norms.

The distribution of agreement in Princeville AAE appears to be conditioned by a complex interaction between sociolinguistic and grammatical factors and shows distinct differences from many accounts of urban varieties of AAE. In particular, Princeville AAE shows MAE-type agreement in approximately 90% of 3rd person singular and plural cases and at nearly 100% for 1st and 2nd person, in contrast to rates of 75-100% non-agreement described for urban AAE in Wolfram (2004).

Results of statistical modeling using logistic and linear mixed-effects logistic regression show significant effects of both sociolinguistic and grammatical factors on patterns of agreement. Education and length of time a given speaker has spent outside of Princeville showed the strongest effects among the sociolinguistic variables considered here. While the effect of education follows the expected direction, leading to a greater degree of convergence towards a prescriptive standard, time outside of Princeville shows an effect in the opposite direction, in addition to considerable speaker-specific variation. Past-tense cases, analyzing the occurrence of was vs were, show quite similar patterns for 3sg, but higher rates of non-agreement (was) for 3pl than were seen in non-past sentences.

An analysis of the grammatical constraints underlying the distribution of verbal -s suggests that an analysis attributing variation in the application of agreement to over-generalization is inappropriate for the Princeville data. Variability in agreement is restricted almost entirely to 3sg and 3pl and is extremely rarely generalized beyond these contexts. Instead, while the patterns are not entirely categorical, there appear to be clear grammatical factors conditioning whether or not the verb shows subject agreement/verbal -s marking.