This paper examines the implicational nature of eleven vowel variables that differentiate AAE from EAE younger speakers in Houston, Texas. For this study, we ranked speakers according to which variants they use, and show that while both groups demonstrate an implicational use of these variables, their use indicates markedly different social meaning for AAE versus EAE speakers.

We have labeled these variables AAE, and indeed, we have shown that for African-American participants, the degree to which speakers use AAE variants corresponds to greater use of AAE overall, for instance correlating with AAE consonantal and prosodic features. We have further shown that the scales are implicational: while virtually all AA participants have unmerged sod/sawed vowels, non-backed dad vowels, and non-fronted dude vowels, only the participants with the highest degree of AAE features produce raised dud and good vowels. The other features pattern in between these sets of features on an implicational scale (Rickford 2002, whereby the use of one feature predicts use of the next), and perceptual tests indicate that speakers at one end of the ranking are more likely to be labeled as “white,” while speakers at the other end are more likely to be labeled as “black.” Thus, we suggest that the use of AAE variants for the AA participants indicates ethnicity.

However, European-American participants also reveal a similar implicational scale with regard to these “AAE” variables, and the variables are arranged in a similar manner to the scale for the AAE speakers: for instance, if an EAE speaker produces an “AAE” variant for the deed vowels (that is, lowered and backed), then he or she will also produce lowered and backed date vowels, and raised and fronted dead and did vowels.

There are some noteworthy differences, nonetheless. First, the scale is truncated for the EA participants: rather than an implicational scale with all eleven variables, the EA scale spans only the middle six. Thus, virtually all EA participants have merged sod/sawed vowels and fronted dude vowels (in direct contrast to the AA participants), and none of them produce raised dud and good vowels.

Second, rather than indicate ethnicity, the two ends of the ranking scale indicate a clear gender-based pattern: with only a single exception, all of the male EA speakers are at one end of the ranking scale, and the female EA speakers are at the other. Further, several female speakers at the lowest end of the ranking produce virtually none of the “AAE” variants.

In sum, examining these eleven variables reveals that the implicational scale can in fact reveal interethnic stylistic differences, particularly at either end; however, the middle of our implicational scale reveals intraethnic variation: while it may be argued that they still indicate ethnicity for the AAE speakers, they appear to indicate gender for the EAE speakers. And while the very same variables are used for stylistic work in each group, they index different social meanings for each.