Intraspeaker Variation: Stop Devoicing in Elderly Black Speakers*

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Abstract

The current study looks at intraspeaker variation in the usage of final stop devoicing in elderly speakers of African American Vernacular English. The speakers were interviewed in one-on-one situations and a group-style situation. The results indicated that participants used final stop devoicing significantly more when they were in a group interview than when they were in a one-on-one interview. In addition to these findings, one of the speakers exhibited apparent differences between quoted speech and speech “as self.” However, upon analysis, the difference in usage of final devoicing by itself was not statistically significant. While the feature alone may not be statistically significant, it could be a part of a larger pattern that is significant. Finally, when confronted with questions about language attitudes, participants varied in apparent metalinguistic awareness, discussing educational status as being a factor in how they were treated earlier in life, with one participant asserting that they recognize situations where they need to “speak well,” and change their speech accordingly.

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1 Introduction

The current study analyzes how elderly speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) change their speech, depending on social context, in order to find out how extra-linguistic factors motivate phonological change. The sociolinguistic variable of interest here is final stop devoicing, a phenomenon in which voiced stops are realized as voiceless, that is /b/ is realized as [p], /d/ as [t], /g/ as [k], and /dʒ/ as [tʃ] in word-final position, such as in good /gʊd/ being realized as [gʊt] or college /kələʤ/ being realized as [kələʃ]. Two speakers were interviewed in two situations: a one-on-one interview between the speaker and the linguist, and a group interview with both speakers present. The results of the study show that both speakers use final stop devoicing significantly more in the group setting than they do in the one-on-one interview setting. In addition to these scenarios, one of the speakers exhibited impressionistic differences between quoted speech and speech “as self.” While devoicing was not significantly more common in quoted speech versus speaking “as self,” the quoted speech was different, suggesting that other features may be contributing to the perception. Variation in the situational and social landscape seems to be responsible for some stylistic, phonological changes within each speaker. Finally, when confronted with questions about language attitudes, both participants varied in their thoughts regarding differential treatment of others based on how they speak. One participant noted that they can “speak well” when necessary, while the other spoke about identity rather than language attitudes, and how they did not feel as though they were better or worse than anyone else in the world. Both participants noted educational status as being a factor in how they were treated earlier in life.
In Section 2, I give a brief history on the emergence of AAVE. In Section 3, I describe some factors that impact phonetic variation, the difference between intraspeaker variation and code-switching, and previous sociolinguistic work on AAVE. In the last part of Section 3, I describe final stop devoicing, other languages that also have this feature, and the environments in which the phenomenon happens. Section 4 is composed of the methods used to carry out my experiment, including information on the speakers, situations, recordings, statistical analysis of the data. In Section 5, I present my results and describe my findings. Section 6 comprises detail about the speakers’ language attitudes, including some transcriptions from the interviews. Finally, in Section 7, I put forward ideas about future research that I would like to do with this data, and I conclude my paper in Section 8.

2 History of AAVE

AAVE, also known variously as Black English, African American English, and the stigmatic term Ebonics, is seen by many people in the United States as incorrect speech. The origins of AAVE have been considered from many perspectives; Southern influences as well as African influences have been hypothesized as possible origins (e.g. Mufwene 2014). Mufwene (2014) describes one hypothesis, that AAVE phonology is essentially Southern English phonology. He claims that AAVE came from Southern English due to the arrival of enslaved Africans. Jim Crow Laws fostered institutionalized residences, which were based on race, forming speech communities. Following this, many black people fled the South in the Great Migration. As a consequence of this migration to the North, outsiders heard these incoming black people speaking a foreign
dialect, and ethicized the language variety as black speech. While Mufwene admits that the origin of AAVE is a highly debated topic, he emphasizes the importance of context, in particular the historical context, when looking at language evolution and the birth of language varieties.

Moreover, even people who accept AAVE as a valid language variety often see it as a homogenous entity. As a consequence, the intersectionalities of race and class or race and gender in the AAVE context have often been overlooked (Houston 1983). Some linguists have studied regional and class variation in AAVE arguing that the, “expansion of dialectal norms across regions is essential in order to conduct appropriate speech-language assessments for culturally diverse clients” (Hinton and Pollock 2000: 68).

Looking at social factors gives better understanding for variability in data. In the early 1900s, linguists generally would look at language in isolation from social context, and point to only demographic differences as reasons for phonetic variation. However, variation can also be due to displacement, language contact, style and personae construction, and other extra-linguistic factors. Language is a behavioral social practice that is driven by social pressures and situations. Thus, it is necessary to understand the social situations of speakers in order to better understand and make claims about why linguistic patterns turn out the way they do, or why a variant might arise. The current study looks at variation within the speakers’ language variety, to see if situational changes in turn motivate feature variation.

3 Background
In this section, I discuss different social factors that can impact linguistic variation. I go on to discuss the difference between intraspeaker variation and code-switching, and provide examples of sociolinguistic variation work on AAVE. I conclude with a description of final stop devoicing, the sociolinguistic variable that I focus on in this research.

3.1 Factors that impact variation

People often vary their speech with the intent of presenting a certain kind of persona (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003) to accommodate others and be a part of the speech community. Eckert (1990) also claims that sound change can even happen regardless of speaker motivation. Just as region plays a role in the phonetic variation, Lambert (1995) notes that variables such as gender could play a crucial part in language variation. Robin Lakoff was one of the first to research women’s language specifically. She suggested that women are marginalized not only because of how they speak, but because of how they are spoken of by others (Lakoff 1973), defining pragmatic features of women’s English such as hypercorrect grammar (consistent use of standard verb forms), superpolite forms (indirect requests, euphemisms), and avoidance of strong swear-words. Additionally, Kramarae (1981) looks at gender variation in English, and points out explicitly that women’s speech cannot be analyzed outside of its social context.

Looking at the linguistic intersectionality of race and gender in the context of AAVE is crucial to understanding linguistic difference. But this would require a serious look at more than just demographics to point to as reasons for variation. Kramarae’s plea was actually previously recognized in the 1960s by Rickford (1968), who posited there
needed to be a new approach to looking at social class when analyzing language. He made the important point that linguists often study language without looking beyond extra-linguistic elements – often ignoring social context. He expresses the importance of ethnographic work, such as having a good understanding of the background and lives of speakers when doing sociolinguistic studies, in order to better understand linguistic patterns and variation within a group.

3.2 Intraspeaker variation versus code-switching

The current study employs an intraspeaker approach to examine feature usage across situations. The term ‘intraspeaker variation’ might get confused with ‘code-switching,’ the act of alternating between different language varieties within a conversational context. Code-switching has become instrumental to the survival of many people, particularly black women, in the United States (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). However, code-switching is different from intraspeaker variation because of the codes that are being used. Code-switching refers to switching from one language variety to another, while intraspeaker variation looks at how one person varies their speech from situation to situation, but within the same larger language variety. Shifting one’s style of expression and language content are some of the leading ways in which black women adjust to the social and behavioral codes to accommodate mainstream white America (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Podesva (2011) looked at intraspeaker phonetic variation of declarative contours in three gay professionals, in order to explore the potential for social meaning of intonational variation. His participants were recorded in three varying settings: a social
situation one-on-one, a professional situation one-on-one, and a social situation in a
group. He found some general similarities between the three men, such as frequent use of
falling tones, and also some outstanding outliers, such as excessive use of rising or level
contours in specific situations. Nonetheless, having done extensive ethnographic work on
his subjects, Podesva was able to attribute the outliers to the social context of each
specific person, such as rising contours being used in an attempt to sound caring and
nonthreatening, or employing level contours so as to not sound too sure or unsure of
oneself. This study is a great example of the importance of social situational awareness in
order to better understand the phonological patterns of a speaker.

3.3 Sociolinguistic variation in AAVE

Some studies on sociolinguistic variation in AAVE include phonetic research
done by Lambert (1995) and Hinton and Pollock (2000), and syntactic research done by
Dayton (1996). Lambert’s (1995) research on English regional variation, in which 22% of
his subjects were African American, found that speakers who were born after the Second
World War often used rhotic vowels and diphthongs. Hinton and Pollock looked
specifically at environments of vocalic and postvocalic /r/, as in bird or bard in speakers
from Memphis, Tennessee and Davenport, Iowa. The researchers discovered that r-
lessness was not present in the Davenport speakers, but showed up in various ways in the
Memphis speakers. With Davenport being predominantly white in contrast with Memphis
which was predominantly black, the researchers concluded that the Davenport
community had shifted from r-lessness to r-fullness, likely due to their surroundings with
speakers of Standard American English.
Dayton (1996) looked at the grammatical categories of the verb in Philadelphian African-American English, such as stressed and unstressed been, that is [bin] and [bɪn] respectively. Though this study deals with syntactic variation, which is outside the scope of this paper, the study is crucial to consider when looking at variation studies, because one weakness Dayton found in her study was that she was limited in number of speakers, due to the longitudinal nature of the study. Thus, she notes that her findings cannot be fully representative of all Philadelphian AAVE speakers, as factors such as “a group of speakers who are bound together through network ties and who form a community based on common locality” cannot alone determine salient features across a language variety as large as AAVE (Dayton 1996).

Fasold and Wolfram described final stop devoicing in AAVE in 1970. Final stop devoicing also exists in German, Dutch, Russian, Turkish, and Wolof. In AAVE, the phenomenon occurs in environments such as those in (1):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bad} /\text{bæd}/ & \rightarrow [\text{bæt}] \\
\text{college} /\text{kɒlædʒ}/ & \rightarrow [\text{kɒlæf}] \\
\text{job} /\text{dʒɒb}/ & \rightarrow [\text{dʒɒp}] \\
\text{bag} /\text{bæg}/ & \rightarrow [\text{bæk}]
\end{align*}
\]

In (1), the final stops that are typically voiced in Standard American English are sometimes devoiced in AAVE. I include affricate stops in my analysis.

4 Methods

In this section I give background information about the speakers and the situations in which they were interviewed, concluding with a detailed explanation about the recordings and the statistical analysis employed.
In the current study, I look at how elderly speakers of AAVE vary their use of devoicing word final stops. The speakers featured in this study are a man and woman (referred to here by their pseudonyms Chester and Laurel), two elderly black people from Burlington County, New Jersey. Chester is 86 and Laurel is 85, and the two have been friends for 80 years. The Bryn Mawr College IRB approved the study (R15-051), and both participants consented to be interviewed.

The speakers have not had much significant contact with languages outside of where they live. This is important for many reasons, one of which being that it is not easy to find people who have had such limited language contact in this day and age in metropolitan areas. Also, there has not been much AAVE phonological study on elderly people, possibly because of the greater likelihood of health and speech difficulties that sometimes come with aging.¹

I chose consultants that I know and have access to, in the same fashion as Podesva picked his participants. Laurel and Chester were both born into lower socioeconomic backgrounds and worked their way up to working class citizens. Both participants were born and raised in Burlington County, New Jersey – Laurel currently still lives there, and Chester is now living in the next town over in Gloucester County, New Jersey.

The speakers have no obvious speech or language impairments. Both are very healthy for their ages and still go out often and spend time with their family and friends. I am personally affiliated with the participants; one is an elderly relative, and the other is a family friend. I, myself, am not a native speaker of AAVE. While my relationships with them may introduce certain biases into my analysis, my lifetime relationships with them

¹ Rose (2006) looks at sociolinguistic variables in elders in a senior center, discussing how certain variables index gender and status distinctions.
provide unique insight when looking at their situations. These speakers trust me, as I am not a stranger coming into their space to study their speech, which I believe afforded me the opportunity to elicit mostly natural speech.

Through varying situational contexts, I was able to analyze Laurel and Chester’s usage of stop devoicing, and record if, how, and when they exhibited distinct phonological pattern changes from one situation to another within the AAVE phonological framework. Laurel and Chester were recorded in two sessions, two weeks apart. Both interview sessions were conducted in Chester’s living room at the kitchen table. I recorded them using a Zoom portable digital recorder. The first session consisted of individual one-on-one interviews with each consultant. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. The second session was an hour-long interview with both consultants present, and talking primarily to each other. The study examines situations that internally exhibit fairly uniform participant structures, with the primary difference being gender. I spoke to them about their personal life and upbringing and also about their attitudes toward language. These situations and conversation topics were chosen with the hope to elicit a variety of speaking styles from each speaker (see Appendix for full list of questions).

Through the interview process with Chester, another potential variable arose with regard to register. Through telling stories, Chester consistently quoted people from his past, as well as his younger self. Impressionistically, it seemed as though he would exaggerate the use of AAVE features when speaking as another person. Thus, Chester’s one-on-one interview and the group interview were separated into Chester’s quoted speech and speech “as self”.
I analyzed the frequency of Laurel and Chester’s use of final devoicing depending on the speaking situation (alone or in a group) and with Chester in both situations, examining quoted versus self speech. The data was collected on the Zoom portable digital recorder, and then analyzed in PRAAT (Boesma and Weenink 2015). I chose to analyze five minutes of each sample. In the individual interviews, I selected five minute chunks in the middle of the interview, during which time the consultant was likely more comfortable than they were at the beginning of the interview and thus more likely to elicit natural speech. In the group interview, Chester dominated the conversation and spoke singularly for more than half of it, so I chose a five-minute sample from this interview in which the consultants were in conversation with one another. With respect to quoted speech, in Chester’s one-on-one interview and the group interview, I pieced together parts from the sample in which he quoted others, totaling five minutes worth of quoted speech in both the one-on-one interview and the group interview.

The raw count of final stop devoicing in each situation per speaker was calculated initially. Samples were compared using Fisher’s exact test of independence. The counts for interaction of the variables are displayed in the contingency table in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L-A</th>
<th>L-G</th>
<th>C-A-S</th>
<th>C-G-S</th>
<th>C-A-Q</th>
<th>C-G-Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voiced</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiceless</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Raw counts of word-final underlying voiced stops realized as voiced and voiceless, for Laurel (L), Chester (C), alone (A), and in-group (G), with Chester’s speech further divided between quoted (Q) and self (S).
5 Results

In an initial listening analysis of the data, Laurel alone seems to exhibit barely any AAVE features, except for a slight drawl. I had to ask Laurel a lot of questions because she was particularly timid to talk in her one-on-one interview, contrasting significantly with Chester, who was asked one question and talked continuously for about 30 minutes. Impressionistically, Chester used stop devoicing often in his one-on-one interview. In the interview with Laurel and Chester together, Chester talked the most, and Laurel barely spoke. However, Chester often looked to Laurel to remind him of things he could not remember, which would induce discourse between them, and both of them would exhibit stop devoicing in that dialog. In addition, when talking about something funny or emotional in the group interview, Laurel would employ the feature more often.

Statistically, the results indicate that Laurel and Chester both increase their use of final devoiced stop when they are in the group setting compared to when they are in one-on-one interviews. They both approximately double their usage of the feature in the group context: Laurel went from 21% usage alone to 50% in group (< 0.003), and Chester went from 34% usage alone to 68% in group (< 0.001), as seen (3):
The graph indicates a very similar pattern of increased usage of devoicing, even with the difference between Chester and Laurel. With regard to the amount of usage per person, that variation can be attributed to individual speech style, rather than to gender. If we had a larger pool of participants, analyses having to do with gender could hold more strongly. Regardless, the results indicate that both speakers employ final stop devoicing more frequently when in the company of one another.

During data collection, it seemed that Chester not only employed varying usages of AAVE features alone versus in-group, but also within each situation, as he would switch back and forth between quoting others and speaking as himself, exaggerating the use of AAVE features when he was speaking as someone else. In addition to this, in the group interview, Chester seemed to exaggerate these features even more. Thus, ‘speaking as self’ (S) and ‘quoted speech’ (Q), in alone and group contexts, resulted as four varying environments to analyze with regard to Chester’s speech, the results of which can be seen in (4):
From the graph, it is evident that in the one-on-one interview, Chester exhibits more final stop devoicing in quoted speech, 41% of the time, rather than when he is speaking as himself, using the feature only 29% of the time, though this result is not statistically significant \( (p = 0.236) \). The group interviews show an increased use of final stop devoicing overall, however the difference between quoted speech and speech “as self” is very small \( (p = 1.000) \). While the usage of the feature may be greater in the quoted speech versus speech “as self” in Chester’s one-on-one interview, given the size of the data set, the results are not statistically significant. This suggests that other features may also be contributing to the impression that Chester’s AAVE is stronger in quoted speech, perhaps in conjunction with the devoicing.

6 Language attitudes
As previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted with open-ended questions regarding personal life as well as questions pertaining to language attitudes. In general, both Chester and Laurel claimed to not believe that language has anything to do with how people treat one another. In the one-on-one interview with Chester, I asked him about language attitudes in the last five minutes of our time together. The dialog in (5) shows Chester asserting his beliefs about equality when it comes to different people and language:

(5)  *Interviewer:* Do you feel like the way that you talk is a part of who you are? Do you think you speak differently than other people? Do you think that people look at you differently because of the way that you speak? Do you feel like everyone speaks the same?

  *Chester:* No no no I do not, I feel as though I am equal to every man, woman, girl, guy that God created. To me, I’m the same as them…I’ll put it this way, I think I just as good as the president! He ain’t no better than me, God didn’t endow him with no more than he did with me…He just happened to go to college, which I didn’t go, and get a good education and then moved on from there and became a well-rounded man. I think to a certain extent I am still a well-rounded person.

(37:45-39:42)

The questions asked here had to do with feelings of identity and language attitudes. Chester does not respond to the questions about language attitudes, and responding more pointedly to questions about identity. Chester displays here a clear sense of pride, by
alluding to the fact that his language, though it may be stigmatized, does not stand for who he is, nor does it define his identity. Most importantly, he is making the assertion that difference does not equate inferiority. He briefly asserts that there are educational differences between him and others, but does not explicitly say whether he thinks this is related to the way people speak. It is clear that on some level, perhaps not a conscious but a subconscious level, he is aware of language being a factor in identity formation, as is evident from the results of this study which indicate that he style shifts. Laurel seemed to have a bit more metalinguistic awareness, at least in her one-on-one interview. An excerpt from her discussion on language attitudes in the one-on-one interview is given in (6):

(6)  

*Interviewer:* Do you think it’s a bad thing (referring to people speaking differently)?

*Laurel:* Oh I don’t know, I never thought about it. You talk the way you talk. You…You’re whoever you are.

*Interviewer:* Do you think your way of talking is a part of your identity at all?

*Laurel:* I think it’s just because, because of the, where I live. And the way I always talked. But, if I have to speak well I can.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean speak well?
Laurel: Well, if I have to uh, um, have an audience and do something in public, then I make a conscious effort and then I speak well, I speak better…but most of the time, you’re relaxed so you don’t have to.

(17:48-19:12)

Laurel acknowledges that she changes the way that she speaks, depending on the situation that she is in, while also asserting that she can “speak well” if the situation calls for that. Though she does not explicitly state that she feels as though the way that she speaks when she is comfortable or relaxed is not “speaking well,” this sentiment is strongly implied. This deviates from the views that Chester expressed in his one-on-one interview. However, in the group interview, when posed with similar questions, Chester posits that he believes that people are treated differently based on how they speak, and Laurel agrees, as seen in the excerpt in (7):

(7) Interviewer: Do you think it is a new day in as far as …how people were treated then versus now, people not getting jobs based on like, ‘Oh they don’t sound educated,’ whatever that means, do you feel like that happened back then, and do you feel like that happens now?

Laurel: Oh sure that happens now.

Chester: I, yeah. Yeah that’s part of it. And part of it I think pa-particularly, my-my grandchildren got these names and, like I was telling you, I can't even pronounce them, their names…I’ll tell you a story of when I was applying for a job… he (Mr. Uley) said “Mr. Edwards I’m
going to be honest with you,” he says, “I not gonna beat around the
bush…But the company policy is” he said, “you look fine – good looking
young man of color…but there’s two things wrong here…one, you don’t
have a high school diploma, and also the company’s a little funny for
hiring people of color,” he said. So actually, he said, “I can tell you this
because the high school diploma is going to hold you up,” he said, “but
allow me to put your application in,” So I thanked him for that…

Laurel: ...I think I might have been nineteen… and we went to this
furniture store, and the man in the furniture store was talking to me, and he
said, uh, did I want a job. He said uh “I could get her a job – I could get
her a job because she has a high school diploma”, he says, he had me write
all this down you know…and he said “I’m- I’m gonna get her a job,” he
said “she speaks well, and she can get a job because she has a high school
diploma.” I don’t even want a job.

(50:50-54:43)

From the dialog in (7), it is apparent that both Chester and Laurel, at the time of
this group interview, felt as though people were treated differently, but based largely on
educational status, as they both discussed stories of their possession – or lackthereof – of
a high school diploma. Particularly interesting is Chester’s change in attitudes from his
one-on-one interview to the group interview. Perhaps Laurel’s initial response to the
question in (7) prompted Chester to follow in the same line of thinking. Regardless, the
language attitudes of the participants are interesting when the results of the study show
that they do vary their speech depending on situational context. This reflects the notion that people vary their ways of speaking in different contexts, perhaps to accommodate others, and this does not always have to be consciously motivated by the speaker (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003).

7 Future research

There are a few directions I would consider taking this project in further research. In the current study, Laurel uses less devoicing than Chester. This could have to do with difference in biological sex, however such a claim cannot be supported with two speakers. In further research, I would like to gather a larger set of lifers from Burlington County, and run a similar study to see if the men and women’s usage of the feature vary by gender of the speakers.

Another direction for future research would be to look at other AAVE features. I would consider this for two reasons. One is that seeing variation of multiple features would be interesting to study, if perhaps the usage of one feature was more variable than another. Of greater interest is the analysis of multiple feature variation with respect to quoted speech versus speech “as self.” Chester’s quoted speech seemed to be drastically different from his speech as self, with respect to exaggerating features. Although final stop devoicing on its own was not enough to be statistically significant in this study, it is possible that it could be a part of a larger pattern with a combination of AAVE features that would be statistically significant when take in aggregate. It would also be interesting to see if there are features which do not vary, falling far enough below the speakers’ awareness that they are not manipulated by sociolinguistic context.
8 Conclusion

In this study, I have argued that among two elderly black speakers, final stop devoicing increases in usage from a one-on-one interview settings to a group setting. I have also suggested that there is evidence that there may be variation of feature usage between Chester’s quoted speech and speech as self, though such variation is not statistically significant in this study. Finally, when asked about language attitudes, Laurel displayed more metalinguistic awareness that Chester lacked in his one-on-one interview, however in the group interview, he seemed more aware. The exploration of intraspeaker study shows us that speakers exhibit phonological variation within their own code and will do so depending on the situational context. The question of language attitudes confirms that language variation is not always speaker motivated. It is clear that the interpretation of the social landscape determines stylistic, phonological changes within each speaker in these, and perhaps other, elderly AAVE-speakers in the Burlington County area.
Appendix

Interview Questions

A variety of questions were used to elicit natural speech. These are the questions that I came prepared with, and were meant to spark conversation. More questions were asked based on the responses of the consultants. Questions with one asterisk indicate questions that I ended up asking.

One-On-One:

1. *Tell me about what it was like growing up in your family.
2. *Tell me about your earliest childhood memory.
3. *What was it like going to school when you were growing up?
4. *Do you think your children speak the same way you do?
5. *Do you think you speak differently than other people?
6. *Do you think people are treated differently based on how they speak?
7. Is it a bad thing to speak differently than others?
8. Do you feel like the way that you talk is a part of who you are?

Group Interview:

1. *How did you two meet?
2. *Did you know each other’s families?
3. *What is your earliest memory of each other?
4. *Do you feel like people are treated the same way now as they were back in your day?
5. Do you think your children speak the same way you do?
6. Do you feel like everyone speaks the same?
7. *Do you think people are treated differently based on how they speak?
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