

Final Consonant Devoicing as a Marker of Professional Class African American Identity: A Community Study in Washington, D.C.

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Increasingly more studies of African American English (AAE) are including in their scope the speech of middle- and upper-class African Americans (Rahman 2008; Weldon 2011; Alim and Smitherman 2012), rather than the working class male speakers who have been historically privileged as being the most authentic speakers of the dialect (Labov 1972; Fasold 1972). However, thus far, relatively little scholarship has focused on the speech of African Americans in a heavily class-mixing environment, to untangle the ways in which professional class identity is enacted linguistically. This study examines eighteen African American speakers in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Washington, D.C. in order to examine the social conditioning and possible indexical meanings (Eckert 2008) of a documented feature of African American Vernacular English, final consonant devoicing (Green, 2008; Thomas 2007; Farrington 2012).

Twelve professional class and six working class African American speakers were interviewed using sociolinguistic interview techniques, and their interviews were coded exhaustively for voiced final stops, resulting in a total of 3162 tokens. The stops were analyzed for voicing using PRAAT measurements of the duration which voicing pulses continue into the stop closure (effectively, voice offset time). All phonological factors, including preceding and following segment, and lexical factors, such as function vs. lexical word are considered.

A mixed-effects regression model reveals class affiliation as the strongest social predictor of devoicing [$p < 0.001$], with the feature occurring even for speakers who otherwise use few vernacular features. An analysis of metalinguistic commentary offered by the professional class speakers reveals them more aware of specific phonological and grammatical features which characterize African American Vernacular English than the working class speakers, and very sensitive to the social expectation that they will be proficient at code-switching into Standard English. That the feature co-occurs with this kind of commentary suggests that final consonant devoicing may be operating as hyperarticulation—that in response to the widespread awareness of African American Vernacular English (and the subsequent misperception that all African American speakers speak the vernacular) a feature which is the result of speakers' very conscious attempts to speak "correctly" is holding and even gaining ground among professional speakers. Devoicing is thus able to index blackness and articulateness at once, resulting in feature's emergence as an indexical marker of a distinctly professional class African American identity.

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