

Gender, ideology, and stancetaking toward African American English

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This paper explores gender variation and acts of stancetaking among African American speakers in Washington, DC, whose diverse AA community exists amidst rapid gentrification and an overall white-collar, middle-class, highly educated population. I ask two questions. How do social factors including gender, education, and age affect three phonological features – /l/-vocalization (*coo*’ for *cool*), *-in* (*runnin*’ for *running*) and Coronal Stop Deletion (CSD; *eas*’ for *east*) – in DC African American English (AAE)? And what kinds of metasociolinguistic stances (i.e. stances toward AAE as an object, see Jaffe 2009) do speakers employ to negotiate language in the contested and changing community?

11 sociolinguistic interviews with lifelong AA Washingtonians (5 F, 6 M) are analyzed using multiple regressions with mixed effects. While speaker age and educational attainment do not significantly affect the use of the vernacular-linked variants of the features, speaker gender significantly affects *-in* (p 0.006), and CSD (p 0.01). Overall, AA women use *-in*, and CSD less often than do AA men. AA women overall pattern closer to European American men and women who are lifelong residents of Washington, DC (supporting similar findings for back vowels and the PIN-PEN merger by Lee 2011 and Podesva 2012).

Although women appear more ‘standard’ in their use of these features, and men more ‘non-standard’, these patterns are not necessarily directly reflected in speakers’ experience of language and their orientations to ideas of standardness and vernacularity. Studies of performance and attitudes toward vernacular speech (e.g. Schilling-Estes 1998, Johnstone and Kiesling 2008), importantly point out the complex, even unpredictable, links between production, experience, and ideology.

Among these speakers, vernacular variants are mobilized in metalinguistic discourse to achieve stylistic enactments of solidarity, individuality, and local identity. Through use of constructed dialogue (Tannen 2007[1989]) as a stancetaking strategy, speakers take up diverse positions towards AAE. Speakers deny the perceived connection between DC AAE and Southern speech (“I’m a Washingtonian!”), and reject racist stereotypes of AA speech (“What did you expect? I can put my verbs together”), as well as accusations of ‘talking white’ (“This is the way that I talk, get used to it”). In short, speakers’ stylistic work realizes the discursive potential of vernacular language in construction of oppositional identities, over and above what patterns of production indicate.

This paper contributes to the investigation of internal variation, ideology, and diversity within AAE, following work on gender (e.g. Nichols 1983, Mallinson and Childs 2007), language awareness and ideology (Houston 2000, Rahman 2008), local identity (e.g. Hall-Lew 2009, Becker 2013) and middle-class communities (Rahman 2008, Weldon 2013) in African American English.