Aspect markers 'steady' and 'stay' in African American English

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Although African American English differs from mainstream varieties of English in its phonology, syntax, and semantics, a disproportionate number of studies focus on high-frequency phonological and morphological variables that occur in the audio recordings of sociolinguistic interviews (Rickford 1999: 15). Efforts to fill in the gap concerning tense and aspect markers suffer from the same frequency constraints: a substantial amount of the literature is dedicated to describing in exhaustive detail the semantic and pragmatic uses and syntactic environments of high-frequency markers such as habitual *be* (Dayton 1996, Green 1998, Green 2002, Labov 1998) and completive *done* (Edwards 2001, Terry 2004, Labov 1998), and the forms that remain largely ignored are those that are low-frequency or syntactically camouflaged— a term that Spears (1982) coins to describe words whose phonological similarity to forms in mainstream English and whose occurrence in the same or similar syntactic environments as the standard form mask their different semantic and syntactic functions.

My paper is a qualitative analysis that seeks to shed light on two under-studied, low-frequency aspect markers: *stay* (which indicates that an action occurs frequently or habitually) and *steady* (which indicates that an action occurs continuously). Data for this paper were collected in June 2011 in two field sites in rural Louisiana: Jena (located in northern Louisiana) and St. Gabriel (located in southern Louisiana). Seven speakers from Jena and nine speakers from St. Gabriel participated in this study. Based on data gathered from recorded and observed speech of the sixteen participants, I will provide a descriptive account of the habitual marker *stay* and the continuative marker *steady*. I will demonstrate that *steady* takes a wider range of subject types and occurs in a wider range of syntactic environments than reported in previous analyses (see Baugh 1983, 1984, Green 2002). I will also argue that the markers *steady* and *stay* have a broader range of semantic uses than previously reported and are used pragmatically to indicate the speaker's negative feelings or indignation, as has been reported for other auxiliaries, such as negative *go* in mainstream English (Spears 1982) and *come* (Spears 1982) and *done* (Labov 1998) in AAE.

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