

**“I don’t sound Spanish, I grew up in Harlem”:
Examining (ay) monophthongization in Puerto Rican English**

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While much research in the field has focused on African American English and to a lesser extent Puerto Rican English, the interaction between these two nonstandard dialects remains relatively under-investigated. As African Americans and Latinos increasingly reside side-by-side in communities throughout New York City and across the United States, often due to shared socioeconomic conditions and parallel residence patterns, the need to examine linguistic contact between these groups is critical. In this study, I focus on two generations of New York-born Puerto Rican-identified native English speakers who live in Spanish Harlem, a New York City neighborhood which has retained a Latino and Black majority for more than sixty years. This study investigates (ay) monophthongization, a phonological feature of Puerto Rican English whose presence is thought to be the result of influence from African American English (Wolfram 1971; Poplack 1978; Zentella 1981).

With (ay) monophthongization, the diphthong /aɪ/ can be produced with glide that is either weakened or completely absent. For example, words like *bide*, and *bye* can be pronounced “bahd” [ba:d], and “bah” [ba:] respectively. Wolfram (1971) examined (ay) monophthongization among young Puerto Rican males in Spanish Harlem in the 1960s and found that those with extensive African American contacts exhibited the highest rates of this variable. While the current study finds that rates of monophthongization among young Puerto Rican men in Spanish Harlem have remained stable (and continue to be higher for those who have mixed friendship networks), it is far less common now for a young Puerto Rican male have social networks comprised of only other Latinos. This finding is supported by ethnographic data from the larger Spanish Harlem community, which suggests that community norms have shifted, so that maintaining a social and familial network that consists of only other Puerto Ricans is seen by many speakers as a negatively marked and deliberate choice. Language norms seem to have followed suit, with all Puerto Rican English speakers in the study showing productive (ay) monophthongization, albeit with significantly higher rates for younger speakers.

An analysis of (ay) monophthongization was conducted using GOLDVARB X for 28 speakers, men and women from two age groups (15-30 and 30-60). Results indicate that (ay) monophthongization in Puerto Rican English shows many of the same constraints as it does in African American English, including being favored in open syllables and before voiced consonants, while being disfavored before voiceless consonants. There are also frequency effects, with the monophthongal variant being favored in high frequency words. Moreover, there is a subset of speakers (primarily men) who show fairly low and average rates of monophthongization when tokens from across the lexicon are analyzed, but show drastically higher rates of monophthongization when analysis is restricted to the top four most frequent words. This suggests that word frequency may also be playing an important role in how sociolinguistic variables are used to construct identity, particularly in this case of dialect contact.

References

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