

Intra-ethnic style continua in Houston AAE and EAE

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This paper discusses how Houston African-American and European-American youths systematically co-vary vowel features to produce ethnically affiliated speaker styles. We show that as speakers position themselves on a continuum from black to white-affiliated speech, their adoption of some features presupposes the adoption of other features. This points to a complex hierarchical relationship among stylistic resources and makes speaker style appear as a matter of both individual calibration and shared assumptions about what constitutes meaningful points on a stylistic continuum.

Houston ethnolects, specifically Black and White dialects, show clear trends towards diverging. This is due in large part to the retention of Southern features by AAE speakers (rotated front vowels in *deed/did* and *day/dead*, the *pin/pen* merger, and monophthongal *ay*), and, on the other hand, a move towards a Western vowel system by EAE speakers (backed *dad*, lowered *dead*, fronted *dude* and *toad*, and merged *sod/sawed*). In addition, a number of other variables serve to differentiate these ethnolects, among them raised *dud* and *good* for AAE speakers.

For this study, nine variables were used to rank twenty-nine young Houston speakers according to their participation in Houston AAE versus Houston EAE. As expected, these rankings reveal that participation in the respective ethnolects is continuous, and that while the speakers at the poles have widely divergent dialects, there are speakers in the middle of the continuum who have similar ethnolect scores (and who listeners perceive to be “white” regardless of their actual ethnicity). However, there is virtually no overlap: with regard to the range of scores, every African-American youth is on one side of the midpoint, and every European-American youth is on the other.

Furthermore, the African-American speakers’ use of AAE features reveals an implicational scale (DeCamp 1971, Rickford 2002), whereby the use of one feature predicts use of the next. For instance, high front vowel rotation predicts the other eight AAE features; non-fronted *dude* predicts the next seven; raised *dud* predicts the next six, and so on. However, all African-American speakers – even those with the lowest AAE scores -- use variants that none of the EAE speakers use, such as rotated *day/dead*, and unmerged *sod/sawed*. In contrast, European-American speakers demonstrate far less intra-ethnic variation. Instead their variability is predominantly gender-based. While most EAE males retained at least one Southern-shifted variant, none of the EAE females did; conversely, most of the female EAE speakers used backed *dad*, while few males did.

This suggests that (older) Southern variants carry different stylistic meanings in African-American and European communities: in the former, the implicational scale reveals that they signify greater participation in AAE (and in fact co-vary with other phonological, morphological and syntactic features); in the latter, they instead mark masculinity.

We are therefore given a window into how stylistic variability creates different aspects of identity: our continuum allows us to chart not only speakers’ participation in opposing ethnolects, but nuanced identities within those ethnolects.