

Intonational phonology of yes-no questions in African American Vernacular English

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African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has suprasegmental phonology that differs from Standard American English (SAE). This paper confirms previous findings that AAVE speakers use a wider variety of intonational contours in yes-no questions than SAE speakers (Jun and Foreman 1996), and are more likely to have level or falling terminal pitch (Green 2002). The paper further reassesses Tarone's (1973) claim that AAVE speakers are more likely to have falling terminal pitch on yes-no questions in "formal, threatening situations," linking falling terminal pitch to grammatical structure instead. Finally, additional factors influencing yes-no question intonation are identified: inversion strongly affects final syllable pitch slope in AAVE but not SAE speakers, and AAVE speakers manipulate final syllable pitch height more than pitch movement to convey subtle semantic differences.

A total of 125 yes-no questions were examined, 83 from the CALLFRIEND American English corpus, and 42 from a collection of sociolinguistic interviews in East Palo Alto, CA. There were 12 speakers, four males from Pennsylvania, and eight females from New York, Michigan, and California. A subset of the AAVE and non-AAVE speakers were matched based on age, gender, and state of origin. Duration, pitch range, and pitch slope was measured for each question as a whole, and also for the final word and syllable of each.

AAVE speakers were confirmed to have flat and falling pitch on the final syllable about twice as frequently as SAE speakers, even when controlling for prosody of the last several syllables. However, AAVE speakers often exhibit a gradual rising pitch beginning much earlier in the IP phrase than SAE speakers. This results in speakers of both dialects having nearly identical average pitch slope over the whole question.

Tarone (1973) claims that AAVE speakers use falling terminal pitch more often in formal situations. Results here, however, suggest that falling terminal pitch may also be associated with question inversion. Two of the AAVE speakers were significantly more likely to have a rising pitch slope on the final syllable in noninverted questions.

All questions examined here were asked either to obtain new information ("information seeking"), or to confirm speaker beliefs ("information confirming"). While these categories can be difficult to distinguish, their phonetics differed significantly in both SAE and AAVE speakers. Both groups showed a greater pitch range and higher maximum pitch on the final syllable of confirming questions. However, SAE females and AAVE males differed significantly in their mediation of this pitch range and height change. AAVE males raised pitch height of the final syllable on confirming questions, while only slightly increasing its slope, while SAE females lowered the minimum pitch of the final syllable and raised its maximum pitch, resulting in much greater pitch movement. These findings indicate that differences in semantic meaning in AAVE correlate with changes in syllable pitch height more so than pitch movement.