

**“If the school not open, can’t sit right there”:
Direct quotes and prosodic rhythm in
African American English**

Rasmus Nielsen (*University of Southern Denmark*)

The current study investigates the social meaning of prosodic rhythm (or timing) in African American English, and how this paralinguistic signal varies within the speech of a single individual. The study of rhythm in African American English has mainly compared group scores from speakers of European American English and African American English using the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) (Low and Grabe 1995), which measures the degree with which a language variety is, for instance, stress-timed or syllable-timed. Previous studies found no measurable synchronic differences between the abovementioned groups (e.g. Thomas and Carter 2006), yet prosody and rhythm are viewed as salient features of African American English (Spears 1988). Further, our understanding is limited with regards to possible intra-individual variation in prosodic rhythm, including how individuals strategically use rhythm to project personal identities and create positions in relation to sociocultural opportunities and constraints. In the present study, I address the above shortcoming by mapping PVI scores to specific moments in discursal interaction. Specifically, I focus on how prosodic rhythm is used in direct quotes in narratives, which increase the immediacy of a past utterance in a present conversation (e.g., Hymes 1977, Schiffrin 1981). The benefit from such a quantitative and qualitative fusion is an understanding of how rhythm can shift from being syllable-timed to stress-timed in order to accomplish specific interactional goals, including creating diverging stances and alignment between speakers.

The data is a one-hour sociological interview with ‘Michael’, a fourteen-year-old African American from Washington, D.C. (Froyum Roise 2004). ‘Michael’ is a vivid storyteller, and the interview centers on topics of concern for inner city minority teens, including teenage pregnancy, violence, police confrontations, and death (cf. Schilling-Estes 2007). ‘Michael’ uses variation in prosodic rhythm to position his antagonists in the storyworld and imbue certain authoritative character traits. For example, ‘Michael’ performs the speech of a police officer who follows him around the neighborhood and changes his rhythm accordingly, “Cause like we didn’t– cause, they said, ‘if the school not open, can’t sit right there.’ And they told us to move.” In the performed speech (*italics*), ‘Michael’ is significantly more stressed-timed compared to the more syllable-timed surrounding speech in the narrative discourse (PVI stress-timed speech = 0.71; PVI syllable-timed speech = 0.29; $p=0.03$). The analysis of 200 PVI measurements demonstrates that ‘Michael’ throughout the interview is a stress-timed speaker ($N=200$, $PVI=0.47$), in line with previous group findings on African American prosodic rhythm (Thomas and Carter 2006). However, the distinction between stress-timed or syllable-timed speech is blurred when viewing rhythm in specific moments of interaction. I conclude my analysis by showing that highly stress-timed speech in direct quotes enables the occurrence of shifting stress patterns and amplifies patterns of continuing shifts between high and low pitches (Loman 1967, 1975; Tarone 1973). The current study seeks to contribute to the understanding of African American English intonation by uncovering the social meaning layered in intra-speaker prosodic rhythm.