

Recent studies of the development of African American English (AAE) within rural Southern enclaves have revealed important information regarding regional accommodation and substrate influence (e.g. Wolfram & Thomas 2002; Mallinson & Wolfram 2002; Childs & Mallinson 2003; Carpenter and Hilliard 2003; Carpenter 2004). Despite wide differences in population, geography, and regional and cultural context, North Carolina communities such as Hyde County, Roanoke Island and Texana all show some degrees of an African substrate effect. Each of these studies attributes the differences in the trajectories of AAE features, in part, to community-specific external factors such as social marking of a feature, the sociohistorical relationship to the surrounding community, ethnic identity, communities of practice and individual variation. In addition, studies of intra-communal variation such as those in the Lumbee Native American community (Schilling-Estes 2000) demonstrate how a specific set of external factors can be used to reveal not only different patterns of variation and change across communities, but within them as well. Of the communities considered in the studies there has yet to be data available from a relatively large, autonomous, mono-ethnic, socially isolated African American community. This paper attempts to contribute to the study of the regional development of AAE by examining both “core” and locally significant AAE features from one such Southern enclave that that is the oldest of its kind.

Princeville, North Carolina, settled in 1865 by freed slaves who gathered on an unwanted flood plain along the Tar River, became the first municipality incorporated by African Americans in the United States in 1885. This 98% African American town, which now has a population of just over 2,000, has endured and overcome several obstacles throughout its history, including racial intimidation, economic and social isolation, and repeated flooding.

Through the examination of data from almost 40 sociolinguistic interviews with three generations of life-long Princeville residents, we determine how this long-term, exclusively African American community is situated with respect to the sociolinguistic patterns found in other historically isolated African American communities. The data indicate a substantial presence of some of the “core features” of AAE (e.g. copula absence, inflectional –s absence, prevocalic consonant cluster reduction, postvocalic r-lessness, etc.) among the oldest speakers of Princeville. At the same time, we see the intensification of some AAE features that are restricted in other enclave situations, for example, generalized plural –s absence (e.g. lots of dog<sub>s</sub>). Though the study reinforces the “core feature hypothesis” in earlier AAE, it also suggests that language variation in earlier and contemporary AAE is not only determined by the overarching regional European American variety but by the development of localized, distinctively AAE features as well. In researching the trajectories of language change in Princeville, we raise questions about variation as it pertains to locally-defined social class. The analysis of Princeville speakers thus reveals that trajectories of language change in rural enclave communities should be analyzed based not only on comparable communities but also on intra-communal localized AAE features and social factors.