

Until recently, quantitative studies of morpho-syntactic variation in African-American Vernacular English have focused mainly on variation in verb tense and aspect (e.g. copula deletion, habitual ‘be’, 3rd person –s, etc.). One grammatical feature of AAVE that has received surprisingly little attention in quantitative sociolinguistics is the use of existential ‘it’ in place of Standard English (SE) ‘there’ (e.g. “It’s a lot of kids in here” versus “There’s a lot of kids in here”). Studies that do mention this factor do so only in passing (e.g. Rickford et al 1999), or in relation to variation in other syntactic structures, such as negative inversion (Martin and Wolfram 1998). It is likely that this feature has not been considered thus far in quantitative studies because of its infrequent occurrence in indirect methods of data collection. However, since existential constructions are generally considered to be semantically void subject placeholders in syntactic theory, they provide an ideal site for the investigation of syntactic variation and change in AAVE because they overcome the obstacle of semantic equivalence that other syntactic features face in variation studies.

In this paper, I discuss the findings from a rapid and anonymous survey that I performed in a predominantly African-American community of Washington, DC, in which I elicited existential constructions by asking informants for directions to a local supermarket. After coding responses based on the form of the existential used and the perceived age and sex of the informants, I employed the apparent time construct to determine whether existential usage in AAVE seems to be converging toward or diverging from SE over time.

Results indicate increased existential ‘it’ usage among the younger generation of speakers in this study, which points toward a divergence from SE with respect to this syntactic feature of AAVE. However, this divergence is exhibited chiefly by the young females, with younger males actually showing a slight downturn in existential ‘it’ compared with middle-aged speakers.

In addition, a third possible variant of the existential – ‘zero’ (e.g. “(A) Safeway two blocks up”) – is also prevalent in the data and shows patterning similar to ‘it’ with respect to age and gender, with younger speakers, especially younger females, showing increasing usage levels for existential ‘zero’.

This study contributes to the ongoing research in AAVE variation and change by investigating a syntactic variable that has not been given attention previously in quantitative sociolinguistic studies of AAVE. In addition, the study demonstrates that while AAVE-speaking communities in general may show linguistic divergence from other communities, there is also intra-community differentiation, which may serve to mark important intra-ethnic, gender, and other social divisions. This study also demonstrates the utility of the rapid and anonymous survey in examining existential variation because it successfully targeted a structure that is not encountered frequently without resorting to direct methods of investigation, which tend to skew data toward standard usages. Finally, this study has also revealed the possibility of a third variant of the existential – ‘zero’ – that has not been previously documented in descriptions of AAVE syntax.