

## Features of AAVE as Features of PRE: A Study of Adolescents in Philadelphia

The similarities between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Puerto Rican English (PRE) were noted by Labov and Cohen (1968) and Wolfram (1974) in NYC, and by Poplack (1978) and Labov and Harris (1986) in Philadelphia. In these studies, the use of AAVE features in PRE was generally attributed to contact. In the present study, we look at the use of habitual 'be' and the variable realization of the interdental fricatives (th) and (dh) in a group of 18 adolescents in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Philadelphia. All subjects attended the local elementary school or high school.

Habitual 'be' in AAVE is used in habitual predicates, as in, *We be talking in her class*, for, *We usually talk in her class*,<sup>1</sup> and has been found to occur less frequently among older adults than children and adolescents (Bailey and Maynor 1987; Cukor-Avila and Bailey 1995). In this study, PR adolescents use habitual 'be' to varying degrees; but those who use it most do not have extensive AA contact. Its use in spontaneous speech was high among a group of elementary school girls who report having no AA friends, but do listen to AA music. Though previous studies have reported that PR boys are more likely to assimilate AAVE features (Poplack 1978; Zentella 1997), the speakers who actually use it the most are 17 year-old girls who grew up in the neighborhood.

The phonological variables (th) and (dh) can surface as [θ], [f], [t], [ʔ], or zero, and [ð], [v], [d], or zero, respectively. The occurrence of the non-standard variants is constrained both by internal linguistic factors and style shifting. Interestingly, the PRE speakers show a much higher percentage of the non-standard voiceless labiodental fricative word-finally: 48% [f] vs. 17% [θ] (N=155). Wolfram (1974) analyzed this pattern as assimilation to AAVE for PRE speakers in New York. However, as with habitual 'be', many of the elementary school children with the highest percentage of the non-standard variant reported having no AA friends.

While habitual 'be' and the non-standard variant [f] for [θ] are common in the community, there is little evidence of widespread contact between the AA and PR groups. The neighborhood is 66 to 88.5 percent Hispanic and 8 to 18 percent AA (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000). There are only a few AA families living on the blocks we studied and the local elementary school and high school are 87 percent and 76 percent Hispanic, respectively. On the other hand, over 50 percent of the adolescents reported that their favorite musician was an AA artist. Accordingly, we conclude that the youngest speakers in the community acquire these features from other PRE speakers, and/or through identifying with AA culture, not necessarily through contact.

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<sup>1</sup> Other uses of invariant 'be' have been documented, such as unambiguous past reference, but generally account for less than 5 percent of all occurrences (Dayton 1996).

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