

Sociolinguistic Myths in the Study of African American English

Although sociolinguists have performed a valuable service in challenging popular beliefs about African American English (AAE), they also have unwittingly participated in the creation of and perpetuation of some sociolinguistic myths about variation and change in AAE. In this presentation, I discuss several of these myths, including the “supraregional myth,” the “change myth,” and the “social stratification myth.” Data used to challenge the canon of AAE description include a series of empirical studies of different types of rural Southern African American communities in North Carolina, perceptual studies of listener responses to regional and ethnic voices of AAE speakers, and ethnographic observations accumulated over almost four decades of engagement in the description of African American English.

The SUPRAREGIONAL MYTH refers to the assumption that regionality in AAE has been trumped by a common core of shared vernacular traits in AAE. But the establishment of a trans-regional core of vernacular structures does not negate the regional embedding of AAE—in the past or in the present. In fact, the regionality of AAE, both in terms of regional varieties of AAE and in terms of accommodation to cohort European American regional varieties, seems to have been generally recognized within the African American community even if it wasn’t obvious to sociolinguists who were enamored with the common core of shared vernacular structures.

The CHANGE MYTH refers to the fact that the past and present development of change in AAE has often been reduced to a unilateral trajectory in terms of convergence or divergence. In reality, a number of different trajectories of change have been documented for AAE—with respect both to core AAE structures and to regional accommodation. These range from the intensification of AAE features concurrent with the reduction of regionalized features to the reduction of AAE features and the maintenance (even intensification) of regionalized features. Communities of AAE speakers may also indicate a kind of ebb and flow in which core AAE features are intensified or reduced at different time periods, or among different subgroups and/or individuals within a community.

The SOCIAL STRATIFICATION MYTH refers to the assumption that there is an isomorphic correlation between socio-economic status and the use of acrolectal and basilectal AAE. Our empirical comparison of different communities and individuals, however, indicates otherwise. There are a host of community, contextual, social, and personal factors that must be taken into account in understanding the construction, implementation, and regulation of vernacular and mainstream norms in the African American community. The relative autonomy of the community, its adoption of endocentric vs. exocentric norms, the different social affiliations and divisions within the community, and the socialized demands of the local and mainstream linguistic marketplace all seem to be essential factors in understanding the use of local vernacular and mainstream standard variants.

The examination indicates that unchallenged assumptions, unilateral explanations, and imagined dichotomies need to be examined more critically with reference to the canon of AAE description—and with reference to sociolinguistic description in general.