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Phonetic variation in Washington DC: Race, neighborhood, and gender

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The study examines how African American and European American speakers in Washington, DC are participating in widespread sound changes in North American English, approaching from both variationist and discourse-analytic perspectives. The study investigates the linguistic and social factors conditioning the realization of two phonetic phenomena: the fronting of high and mid back vowels (/u/ and /o/ fronting) and the merger/distinction of low back vowels (/ɑ/ and /ɔ/, or cot-caught). A sociophonetic analysis of these variables shows that DC is participating in the 'mainstream' U.S. change, in which high and mid back vowels are being fronted, and low back vowels are becoming less distinct. In DC, speaker race is one of the strongest predictors, with European American speakers exhibiting higher degrees of both fronting and merger. This does not mean, however, that DC African American speakers do not take part in the phenomena; a robust age effect among African American speakers suggests that African American speakers not only exhibit evidence of participation in these sound changes, but are moving towards higher degrees of fronting and merger in apparent time. One factor that affects the speech of African Americans in DC is speaker's neighborhood background, in which African American speakers from the Southeast (SE) neighborhoods exhibit different vocalic characteristics from those who are from elsewhere in the city (non-SE). Specifically, SE speakers do not participate in the mainstream back vowel trend of fronting and merger. There is also evidence that suggests further differences even among SE speakers, depending on speaker sex. The study delves into this uniqueness of SE speakers in their back vowel patterns, particularly gaining insights from their discourse surrounding some of the neighborhood issues, such as SE's bad reputation and SE's street-oriented culture.

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