ANNUAL REVIEWS

From African American Vernacular English to African American Language: Rethinking the Study of Race and Language in African Americans' Speech

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Keywords

Abstract

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), one of the most studied dialects in American English, has undergone several changes in its label across the years. Its most recent designation, African American Language (AAL), reflects a change in approaches to studying race and language in the field. Drawing on observations from related fields like linguistic anthropology and critical race theory, I discuss different conceptualizations of the relationship between race and language and argue in favor of an approach that both recognizes and prioritizes the study of variation within the dialect. This approach will enable researchers to advance theory in language variation and change while also contributing to larger sociopolitical objectives to diversify narratives of blackness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of African Americans' speech on the development of sociolinguistics has been significant since its earliest descriptions within this discipline in the late 1960s (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969). Rickford (1997b) and others have been critical of the unequal partnership between researchers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and African American speech communities given the myriad of theoretical innovations that data from AAVE speakers have contributed to the field. Some examples include "the development of variable rules and frameworks for the analysis of tense-aspect markers, social class, styles, narratives, and speech events" (Rickford 1997b, p. 161). Despite the field's generation of these theoretical and analytic tools, much remains to be gleaned from our observations of these communities, and much remains to be returned to them. Specifically, we should document and represent the language patterns of the African American community more broadly while also implementing various social justice aims. The need to reconsider our scholarly approaches to racialized varieties like African American Language (AAL), and to include and consider more racialized participants in the process of knowledge production, is evident in the Linguistic Society of America's move to craft a Statement on Race addressing these goals (Charity Hudley et al. 2019). Toward this end, the goal of this review is to rethink the relationship between race and language via the study of AAVE and thereby address broader sociolinguistic and sociopolitical concerns.

To understand the relationship between race and language in the field, I trace what Wolfram (2015) has called "the sociolinguistic construction of African American Language." I discuss the field's larger objectives and controversies while also considering the subjectivity of racialized participants. A bird's eye view of how African Americans have been historically situated in relation to the variety will inform the new questions we develop as well as the kinds of approaches we use to answer them. Specifically, we can ask how to relate scholars' larger goals of AAL and sociolinguistics to the goals of the African American communities in which we are engaged (Charity Hudley 2017).

2. THE HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

2.1. Labeling the Variety

A review of the field's approaches to studying African Americans' speech should first address linguists' naming practices of the variety over the last five decades. Various titles of the dialect will carry different kinds of ideological baggage that necessarily interact with the changing social climate (Green 2002, Smitherman 1991, Wassink & Curzan 2004). Broadly, the name used for the dialect serves three functions: identifying the racial group whose language production is being described, indicating the variety's relationship to English and creoles, and specifying the subset of African Americans whose language is being characterized (Green 2002).

With respect to the first function, the name can reflect how members of the racial group are referenced or refer to themselves. For instance, earlier versions of the variety, such as Negro dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, and Negro English, enlist an identifying term that has become obsolete as speakers have opted for black or African American. As such, the identifying terms used by members of the racial group under discussion are represented in more recent labels of the dialect. Labels like black in Black English and Black Street English or African American in African American (Vernacular) English and African American Language do not always straightforwardly denote the groups being referenced as they can implicate groups of more recent African and West Indian descent or speakers who are the descendants of enslaved Africans in America (Baugh 2001, Blake 2014, Labov 1972).

The second potential function of the dialect's name is to identify the relationship of the variety to English or creoles and denote the proposed origins of the dialect. Specifically, Green (2002) notes that names that include the word English tend to denote the similarity to other varieties of English, whereas the absence of the word English emphasizes the creole roots of the dialect.

The third function, which is to specify the subset of African Americans whose language practices are being characterized, can be denoted by researchers' use of the word vernacular. Specifically, Labov (1972, p. xiii) explains that in his designation of the term Black Vernacular English, he is referring to the "relatively uniform grammar found in its most consistent form in the speech of black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities." Terms like Black Vernacular English and African American Vernacular English reference a specific kind of classed African American identity frequently observed among youth's street culture, though the variety can be used by African Americans of all ages and genders (see Section 2.3 for an in-depth discussion of how a specific persona came to typify the dialect). The inclusion of the word vernacular in the term African American Vernacular English points to the variety's most basilectal forms of speech, which are frequently attributed to young black men. This definition is important because it reflects how AAVE fundamentally differs from subsequent labels like AAL in terms of whose language is referenced.

Attributing a language variety to an ethnic group's speech poses special challenges because language production varies across groups, as they are not static. That is, shifts in a variety's label reflect the tension of finding a name that both accounts for the spectrum of diverse linguistic behavior across the African American community and reflects how American descendants of African people want to be identified. For these reasons, the name AAL is appealing as a neutral term broadly pointing to "all variations of language in African American communities," including dialects like Gullah and AA(V)E (Lanehart 2015, p. 3). Its intended function—to be more inclusive of the language behavior of all African Americans—means attending to all African Americans regardless of social differences like class, gender, and region. In recognizing the broad range of African Americans whose speech can be documented, AAL should also account for language differences beyond those attributed to the variety AAVE. The changes in names do not denote a lack of systematicity or legitimacy with respect to speakers' rule-governed phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic, or lexical patterns. Rather, they reflect the changing sociopolitical landscape for African Americans and the evolving commitments linguists have to the field and to speakers of the dialect.

Some researchers may argue that the broadness of the term AAL may conflict with the need to varietize the linguistic behavior, pointing to a specific set of canonical linguistic behaviors as a single entity. Put differently, if the purpose is no longer to reference the canon of linguistic behaviors previously documented in the study of AAVE patterns but instead to portray the range of behavior more generally, then one can do so without using a label and simply reference speakers' behavior as African Americans' speech. Further, the use of the term language may imply that the dialect is not related to English and is somehow more distinct. The goal of this review is not to solve the debate over whether to use a label. Rather, this review follows how the changes in the label reflect linguists' evolving approach to studying African Americans' language and identity.

The naming of the dialect has various consequences that reflect the ways in which we ideologize race and African American identity (Blake 2014). These ideologies need to be evaluated in concert with the larger sociopolitical aims linguists have in addressing the various needs across African Americans. Because there are multiple kinds of social aims—among them, representing the expanse of African Americans' speech and documenting the most stigmatized speech patterns across communities to legitimize the language system of speakers for education and/or legal objectives—it may seem that no single label could achieve all of these purposes. However, in using any of the aforementioned labels, we should foreground our larger goals in our analyses; we need

to ask which theories we are aiming to develop and which sociopolitical goals we are aiming to advance.

2.2. The Controversies

Labov and colleagues' (1968) exploration of black speech in New York City had an educational aim: to document the different language patterns between white and black speakers and ultimately reverse education failures among black urban youth. Documenting the structural differences across the variety and observing the linguistic constraints around particular features helped establish the dialect as grammatical, or rule governed. Subsequent descriptions of African Americans' speech followed in those footsteps, maximally distinguishing African Americans' "vernacular" speech from the speech of their European counterparts (Wolfram 2007, 2015). By documenting occurrences of the same linguistic patterns in different African American–dense cities like New York (Labov 1972), Detroit (Wolfram 1969), Washington, DC (Fasold 1972), and Los Angeles (Baugh 1979), the cross-regional comparisons helped legitimize the dialect and, thus, established a set of core structural features that defined the dialect in its most basilectal production. Wolfram (2011) argues that these features are sociolinguistic axioms, which are the foundation of the sociolinguistic canon and emphasize the uniformity of the language. These descriptions tended to focus more on the phonological and morphosyntactic aspects of the language than on the other linguistic dimensions of the variety, such as the discursive, pragmatic, and lexical aspects (Smitherman 1977, Wolfram 2015).

After these base features had been established and the dialect had been legitimized, subsequent work moved beyond description of the dialect and centered around debates internal to the field. One of the foremost debates has been the Anglicist versus Creolist controversy, which concerns the origins of AAVE. Anglicists and Neo-Anglicists argue that AAVE descended from dialects spoken in the British Isles among indentured servants and other English settlers (Crum 1940; McDavid & McDavid 1951; Mufwene 1992; Poplack 2000; Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991, 2001). Creolists contend that because AAVE shows substrate West African influences, this suggests that it was once a creole that decreolized and restructured over time (Bloomfield 1933, Dillard 1972, Rickford 1998, Winford 1992). A centralist position acknowledges that AAVE reveals both creole and British Isles influences. More recently, others (Wolfram 2015, Wolfram & Kohn 2015) have argued against the need for a singular AAVE origin story in light of the various sociohistorical circumstances under which African Americans have been integrated into their communities.

Questions about the dialect's origins have also been tied to discussions surrounding its present trajectory. Recognition of the same sets of features across disparate cities raised questions about the extent to which the variety is becoming more or less like Mainstream American English (MAE) or, more specifically, the local white varieties. The divergence versus convergence controversy ushered in a new range of studies that assessed the development of the dialect cross-regionally in light of the movement and settlement of African Americans via the Great Migration. As waves of African Americans moved north and west after World War I in search of employment and to escape the racist conditions of the South, the concentration of African Americans in urban city centers affected the extent to which they interacted with white communities and the kinds of cultural and linguistic norms that emerged within the community.

The first study to address this question more explicitly was Labov & Harris's (1986) investigation of black Philadelphians' divergence from the local white vernacular. They concluded that the growing segregation between black and white residents corresponded to the widening gap in linguistic features with distinct patterns developing among either group. Subsequent studies have shown that both sides of the debate are true: Some black communities have diverged from their

white counterparts, and others have converged across different kinds of linguistic patterns (Bailey & Maynor 1987, 1989; Butters 1989; Fasold et al. 1987).

The comparisons between regional varieties raised questions regarding the extent to which AAVE is a uniform variety. Observing different rates of usage for specific morphosyntactic patterns and different degrees of participation in particular sound changes prompted sociolinguists to question whether the literature adequately represented the expanse of African Americans' linguistic practices and identity. Wolfram (2007) argues that scholars were propagating a kind of sociolinguistic folklore via their construction of the supraregional myth, the unilateral change myth, and the social stratification myth. The supraregional myth assumes that AAVE is a uniform variety and that "the primary structural features setting apart the vernacular speech of African Americans from their European American cohorts were shared by African American communities regardless of regional context" (Wolfram 2007, p. 295). The unilateral change myth proceeds from assumptions of uniformity and presupposes that structural changes unfolded unilaterally across the dialect regardless of region and sociohistorical context. Lastly, according to the social stratification myth, the use of AAVE features was socially stratified by class such that working-class African Americans were more likely to use "vernacular" features.

Engaging with Wolfram's evaluation, Thomas (2007) took up this criticism in the formation of the uniformity hypothesis. As in the divergence versus convergence controversy, these questions explored the relationship between AAVE and local varieties, but the emphasis was on the likeness of African Americans' speech across and within different communities. Specifically, Yaeger-Dror & Thomas (2010, p. 3) pose the following questions:

1. Is there a set of norms for AAE [African American English] throughout the country to which many or most African Americans are oriented (even if not all African Americans acquire the normative forms)?
2. What degree of geographical uniformity does AAE exhibit?
3. How dependent or independent is geographical variation in AAE from geographical variation in the white vernaculars of the same region?

Investigations of these questions tend to focus on analysis of speakers' vocalic systems (Thomas 2007, Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2010) because these linguistic features make ideal grounds for answering questions about geography and regional identity. Like the divergence versus convergence hypothesis, the results are mixed, with African Americans rejecting or adopting various aspects of the regional dialect and some speakers taking up the vocalic patterns more than others in their communities.

2.3. Against the Uniformity Assumption

Earlier explorations of AAVE aimed to legitimize the variety by packaging a particular set of linguistic variables racialized as black. Referencing such linguistic behavior as a single object of study enabled sociolinguists to address linguistic discrimination that black people faced in education, housing, employment, and law settings. Sociolinguists believed that by showing systematic and cross-regional patterns, they could combat claims that this speech style was ungrammatical. Under these approaches, the sociolinguistic construction of AAVE relied on the presentation of a uniform, systematic dialect. However, more recent approaches aimed at understanding the development and change of the dialect over time have begun to elucidate the variation. The new observations that emerged from using these new techniques led to the critique that sociolinguists were homogenizing the linguistic practices and identities of African Americans across and within speech communities and problematized the notion that sociolinguists were studying a single

dialect (Wolfram 2007). Despite sociolinguists' good intentions, some of their generalizations about African Americans' speech had unintended consequences. As Bucholtz (2003, p. 402) notes,

> But the recognition of AAVE and its speakers necessitated a series of simplifications that reduced the complexity of AAVE users to a subset of the entire community and reduced the complexity of African American language use to a subset of the community's entire repertoire. Such simplifications were certainly not intended to be the full story but instead functioned as strategies that allowed sociolinguists to intervene in a high-stakes sociopolitical issue despite very real constraints.

The issue of homogenization is a question of whose speech is considered representative of the black experience. As is evident in earlier instantiations of the dialect's name, researchers were aiming to study a specific sample of the African American population: young people in inner cities, especially young men (Labov 1972). Thus, AAVE's close association with working-class, black, male identity is no surprise given our field's foundational studies, which reflect our larger society's beliefs about who speaks AAVE. Put differently, the fact that the speech of young black men from inner cities defines the field says as much about conceptualizations of what blackness is as it does about who is seen as the most authentic speaker of the variety. This construction of the ideal or imagined speaker is meaningful and cannot be divorced from the ways in which those speakers are positioned in the society. As Wassink & Curzan (2004, p. 181) describe, "'Young, Black, male, and dangerous' continues to be an important social construct for dominant America. Many Americans hold an ideology that marks that construct by associating it with a way of speaking, among other behaviors."

The critique of older approaches' centering of African American male experiences was advanced as early as the late 1980s when Smitherman (1988) argued against overrepresenting young black men at the expense of studying black women's linguistic behavior. Further, the continued focus on negative aspects of street culture reinforced negative stereotypes associated with African Americans (Rickford 1997b, Smitherman 1988). Morgan (1994, p. 138) also has asked whether "the language styles purported to describe the African American community represent the entire social field." These concerns highlight the ways in which representation has become increasingly important in the study of the dialect.

Given the historical landscape of the field, our research must meet the foundational goal of AAVE scholars (documenting the stigmatized speech patterns of African Americans) while also not essentializing or misrepresenting African Americans' wide array of linguistic practices and identities (King & Rosa 2019). These goals may seem contradictory if we believe that showing variation across the dialect weakens its legitimacy. However, we can still discuss the systematic ways in which language varies among racialized individuals both linguistically and socially while understanding which of those features, or styles, become indexical of blackness and why. An analysis of our theoretical commitments in the broader study of race and language will help us to develop and adopt the necessary analytic tools. Further, an explicit articulation of African Americans' subjectivity will elucidate how we can study and value linguistic diversity among this population and address the linguistic discrimination faced by its most marginalized and civically vulnerable speakers.

3. THE TRAJECTORY OF AAL

3.1. Understanding the Relationships Between Race and Language

What does it mean to study race in sociolinguistics? How has our approach to documenting African Americans' language patterns evolved across the field? In this review, I draw on knowledge

from contiguous fields like linguistic anthropology, sociology, and critical race theory to suggest how we should approach the study of race in sociolinguistics. The changes that have occurred across the study of the dialect reflect the dynamic nature of the field's conceptualizations of African American identity and African Americans' language and the relationship between the two. The recent call for a statement on race within linguistics reflects the felt need of sociolinguists, educators, and linguistic anthropologists for a cohesive model of race in the field (Charity Hudley et al. 2019). While sociolinguists may have understood their research on African Americans' speech to only concern descriptions of language, they have, perhaps unreflexively, subscribed to particular theories of race and identity and participated in the construction of this racialized language. A review of the field's approaches to studying race and language will elucidate the theoretical constructs AAL scholars have employed to analyze and represent African Americans' speech and will also highlight the consequences of such approaches.

The field has two predominant approaches: the dialect orientation and the group orientation (Alim & Reyes 2011). Under the dialect orientation, linguists begin with the dialect and are "concerned with classifying the frequency and distinctiveness of dialect features with respect to some ethnoracial formation" (Alim & Reyes 2011, p. 380). A hazard of this approach is the one-to-one mapping it creates between the dialect and the racial group: Investigations of the dialect only look at African American speakers. Additional complications extend from earlier critiques regarding the essentialization of African Americans' speech. If a set of behaviors racialized as African American is defined against an imagined standard, MAE, which is racialized as white, then we foreground interracial comparisons at the cost of exploring intraracial comparisons. The foregrounded point of comparison between AAVE and MAE can obscure the variation within each group and imply that African Americans who are not proficient in ethnolectal patterns do not have legitimate membership in the racial category and are not worthy of study. Sociolinguists have opposed this idea using the caveat that not all speakers of AAVE are black and not all black people are AAVE speakers (Benor 2010, Green 2002). Others have noted that the dialect approach supports outdated taxonomic models of race by assuming a direct relationship between one's racial identity and the racialized variety (Charity Hudley 2017, Smedley 1999).

This dialect approach favors the ethnolect as a theoretical construct to understand the linguistic behavior of racialized individuals. However, Benor (2010) proposes the "ethnolinguistic repertoire" as a means of addressing some of the issues posed by the dialect approach. The linguistic repertoire was first proposed by Gumperz (1964), but in Benor's (2010, p. 160) recapitulation of the term, it is defined as a "fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities." In an effort to treat ethnic identity as more fluid, this particular theoretical model allows for in-group variation and intraspeaker variation such that speakers can draw on variables from an arsenal of racialized features. Further, this model acknowledges racialized speakers' agency as they engage in the process of bricolage (Eckert 2000). However, the extent to which the ethnolinguistic repertoire captures the ability of racialized variables to index identities beyond race has been called into question. Becker (2014) argues for a more general approach to the repertoire in her examination of an individual African American woman from Harlem. Becker's analyses show that a single speaker can employ any feature from their repertoire, whether "ethnolectal" or not, to construct race and a range of other identities. For example, an AAVE feature, like copula deletion, can be used to construct place identity, while a regional feature, like BOUGHT raising, can be used to mark racial identity.

Becker's approach to studying the variables recruited in the identity constructions across an individual speaker is consistent with what Alim & Reyes (2011) call the group orientation. This approach begins with specific ethnoracial information about a group or speaker and examines the emergence of linguistic practices among members of that group. Alim & Reyes (2011, p. 380) note
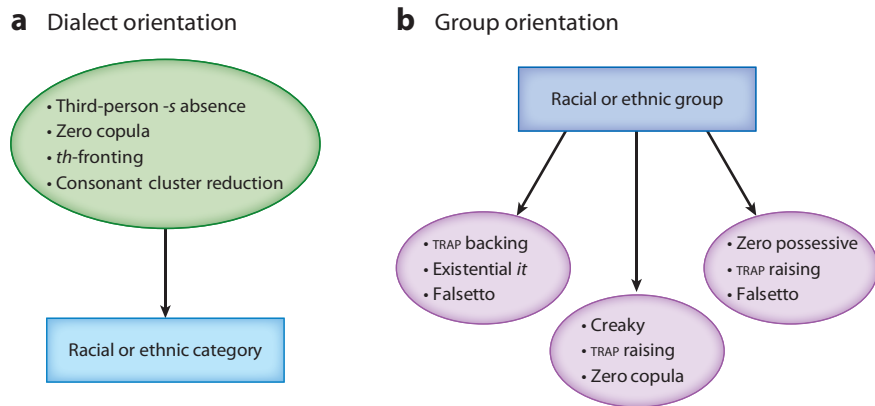
a Dialect orientation

b Group orientation

Figure 1

Approaches to studying race and language based on Alim & Reyes (2011). The diagram represents the difference between (*a*) dialect orientation [in this example, studying African American Vernacular English (AAVE)] and (*b*) group orientation (in this example, studying African Americans' speech). The former approach emphasizes observing the canonical features of a dialect, whereas the latter emphasizes observing the breadth of African Americans' linguistic practices. The group orientation also demonstrates that the canonical AAVE features can covary with features that are not exclusive to AAVE, producing a range of styles across the racial group.

that this approach allows for "ethnic identity to be produced without an ethnic dialect" and necessarily changes how we think about African American speakers in relation to linguistic variation. Without presupposing a set of linguistic behaviors that we expect African Americans to follow, we avoid assuming that the speakers who produce the most AAVE patterns give the most authentic performance of African American identity.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the two approaches with an emphasis on what can be studied using each approach. The difference in the orientations can be reflected in the questions "Who is an AAVE speaker?" versus "What are the linguistic resources African Americans are recruiting in their construction of identities?" Under the guise of the latter question, the study of African Americans' speech need not only include features associated with the ethnolect. Highlighting the differences does not negate the initial approach's contributions to our understanding of race and language; rather, it is a window into how the racial group is situated in relation to its language patterns.

Alim & Reyes (2011) recommend departing from both orientations and transcending the larger macrosocial categories to understand the construction of race and the process of racialization (Charity Hudley 2017). We can learn more about how race is constituted through linguistic practice (Eckert 2000) while also understanding how it informs and is necessarily informed by other dimensions of identity, such as speakers' age, nationality, gender, and sexuality (Alim & Reyes 2011, p. 381). This change mirrors the larger transition in sociolinguistics from correlating variables with fixed macrosocial categories to studying the ways in which variables come to indirectly index these categories via associated qualities and stances (Eckert 2008, 2012). For AAL to arrive at third-wave variationism, we must draw on the theoretic constructs that view language not as a static like the ethnolect but, rather, as a process of meaning making. That is, we can discuss linguistic variation across African Americans, as well as how specific linguistic patterns have come to be racialized, by drawing on third-wave theoretical constructs like indexicality (Eckert 2008, Silverstein 2003) and the persona (Agha 2003, Podesva 2007, Zhang 2005), which emphasize the

social meaning of variables and the ways in which variables combine to produce styles that have become legible as black and African American. These goals fall within the perimeter of raciolinguistics, which seeks to understand how speakers use language to construct race and how race constructs language (Alim et al. 2016, Flores & Rosa 2015).

If the primary concern of AAL is to document the breadth of speech among African Americans without homogenizing the speech community, then future studies should investigate the emergence of linguistic variables among African American speakers and identify which of these variables become indexical of race and other co-constructed dimensions of identity. The group orientation provides a starting point to discuss the features associated with African American identity as well as those that are not. This reframing expands our descriptive power for a dialect that, paradoxically, is overrepresented in sociolinguistic literature (Morgan 2002) but underdocumented in terms of its variation across different linguistic domains and social dimensions. One might argue against this approach because it relies on African Americans' subscribing to taxonomic categories of race by identifying themselves as black. However, part of undoing the singular narrative of blackness relies on discovering the expanse of social and linguistic practices among speakers who identify as black. As a heterogeneous collectivity, African Americans share the experience of being racialized as belonging to the same demographic category, but they need not share the same social constructions of race, and African American individuals can perform their racial identities in diverse ways (Collins 2000, King 2018). Therefore, dismantling stereotypes and raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa 2015) requires understanding how the racial category is constituted via social and language variation.

3.2. A Multidimensional Approach Toward Studying Race in AAL

Resituating racial groups in relation to their speech changes what subjectivity should look like for African Americans in our analyses. With the emergence of new research questions around the construction of racialized language and racial identities, researchers must reconsider whom and what we investigate, looking beyond the traditionally studied AAVE speakers and beyond AAVE. In essence, we must reconsider which African Americans are represented and investigate linguistic features beyond or in addition to the canonical AAVE variables. This reconsideration affects analytic and methodological approaches to data collection and data analyses (Blake 2014, Charity Hudley 2017). Specifically, ethnographic methods will inform our observation of linguistic and social practice, and we need to think more about how to explore and operationalize these locally meaningful distinctions in our analyses (Eckert 2012). Further, we must anticipate that these social differences can manifest across multiple domains of linguistic inquiry that have been understudied in AAL.

In rethinking whom we are studying, we need to think carefully about the kinds of African American experiences we prioritize and for what purposes. The initial intent of investigating young black men from inner cities was to address educational challenges facing these students. However, to study variation among black speakers, we need to look beyond this scope; we should include speakers from understudied communities and backgrounds (King & Rosa 2019) and reconsider our dismissal of "the Lames"—African Americans who do not adhere to AAVE norms (Labov et al. 1968, 1972). In doing so, we should highlight the different ways in which race is co-constructed with other dimensions of identity as well as how particular dimensions might be foregrounded for some speakers but not for others. The study of diversity across African American identity and language is already underway with work advancing our understanding of variation across ethnicity (Blake 2014, Holliday 2016), gender (Lanehart 2009, Rickford & Price 2013), class (Britt & Weldon 2015, Grieser 2015, Weldon 2004), education (Labov et al. 2016), and place

(Bloomquist & Gooden 2015, Grieser 2015, Jones 2015, King 2018, Kohn & Farrington 2013, Lee 2018, Mallinson & Childs 2007, Quartey & Schilling 2019).

Specifically, studies of regionality in AAL have documented the different ways in which blackness is enacted through language across different African American communities [Wolfram 2007, Wolfram & Kohn 2015; see also Kendall & Farrington's Corpus of Regional African American Language online (**https://oraal.uoregon.edu/coraal**)]. These studies have contributed to larger discussions on variation and change and the role of sociohistorical dynamics in shaping variation (Kohn 2018, Wolfram & Kohn 2015, Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2010), but we also have delved into understanding more about how race informs and is informed by place and class (Grieser 2015, King 2018, Lee 2018, Mallinson & Childs 2007). These studies have shown that in considering how African Americans' speech varies cross-regionally, we are also contending with the fluidity of racial identity and its variable realizations across a range of social landscapes.

Work done by Mallinson & Childs (2007) in rural Appalachian communities provides one of the clearest demonstrations of how different constructions of regional identity among black speakers can yield differences in their linguistic performances. Through close ethnographic analyses, the authors identify salient community-specific distinctions among black women from Texana, North Carolina. The "porch sitters" and the "church ladies" are two communities of practice that showed divergent social practices and ideologies; the former comprised more casual, blue-collar workers who did not orient toward the same institutional norms, and the latter were more conservative, middle-class, and oriented toward local educational and religious institutions in the area. Even though all speakers identified as black women, their linguistic behavior appeared to show sensitivity to this in-group differentiation. The church ladies tended to exhibit more participation in regional sound changes, such as back vowel fronting, and the porch sitters exhibited more AAVE patterns with respect to morphosyntactic features, such as copula absence and habitual *be*. The authors argue that the porch sitters seemed more oriented toward AAVE norms than did the church ladies. These findings contribute to investigations of both regionality and racial identity by showing that speakers negotiate their identities via a range of linguistic resources.

The results of focusing on middle-aged and older black women in a Southern nonurban area, rather than on younger men and women from inner cities, underscore the importance of studying language variation among African Americans from different spaces and at different points in time (Wolfram & Kohn 2015). Cross-regional comparisons provide more nuanced insights into the discursive doing of race on macro levels via a set of sociopolitical systems and institutional policies and on micro levels via everyday interactions, interpersonal relationships, and individual identity constructions (Higginbotham 1992, Moya & Markus 2010, Omi & Winant 2015). Sociolinguists have been attentive to the macro-level sociopolitical processes that implicate race and have factored discussions of migration patterns, segregation, and gentrification into their interpretations of how linguistic generalizations emerge and persist interracially. Yet, despite this focus on the sociohistorical context in which we observe racial groups and their linguistic behavior, we need to improve our understanding of how speakers' linguistic behaviors articulate their beliefs about their own social positions on an individual level. That is, we need to look underneath the linguistic generalizations of the macrosocial categories and view speakers' own ideologies about the categories to which they belong and the ways these categories are linked to linguistic patterns via persona construction (Eckert 2008). If the persona is the more immediate social construct that, on the ground, mediates the meaning between sociolinguistic variables and larger macrosocial categories (Coupland 2001, D'Onofrio 2015, Eckert 2012, Kortenhoven 2017, Podesva 2007, Zhang 2005), then observations of the personae that populate the racial category can help pinpoint the specific linguistic variables that are linked to particular kinds of black identities and why.

Investigating various productions of identity among African Americans from my hometown, Rochester, New York, I use ethnographic methods to tap into speakers' local epistemologies about the ideological social structure of the community and how they view their own positions within that landscape (King 2018). Rochester, a region of the inland North, is a postindustrial city that saw its largest influx of African Americans from the 1940s on. Focusing on in-group variation among African Americans, I studied how linguistic variation and sound change are enacted through personae particular to the changing social landscape. Sociohistorical changes in Rochester's economy and settlement patterns affected speakers' ability to participate in the industrial economy during the post–World War II economic boom and gave rise to the current social landscape. Older generations may have constructed working-class identities in a favorable economy, but younger generations struggle to achieve social and economic mobility under the current economic conditions. Thus, the personae that emerge reflect and affect the linguistic variation observed across speakers. Vocalic patterns from the Northern Cities Shift, like TRAP raising, function by way of age with younger speakers producing lower TRAP vowels than older speakers. Yet, the mobile black professional, a young persona oriented toward extralocal economic interests, tended to show the most reversed patterns, using this regional feature less than other speakers in the sample. That is, younger speakers who planned to relocate for work were less likely to use this local pattern than speakers who remained in the area. Though the apparent change in time for the lowering of TRAP mirrors changes in the industrial economy, speakers' beliefs about their own opportunities for mobility within the current social landscape mediated the extent to which younger speakers reversed the trend of the raised TRAP. While we could identify the sociohistorical dynamics that gave rise to the larger macrosocial generalizations, attending to variation on the level of the persona improved our understanding of why this change was propagating across the community and who was advancing it.

Returning to the question of whom and what is analyzed, both Mallinson & Childs's (2007) and King's (2018) studies of variation among African Americans relied on ethnographic methods to understand the sociohistorical context and speakers' ideological structure of the community. This kind of research commits to understanding not only African Americans' linguistic behavior but also the lived experiences of African Americans via their cultural and social practices. If future work in AAL views African Americans as the subjects of study, then we must prioritize the study of linguistic and social variation across all speakers regardless of whether they fit traditional characterizations of African American identity. Further, our work should move beyond the idea that speakers are only using variables to mark their racial category; instead, we should view speakers as constructing multidimensional identities that vary across multiple planes of social difference. By doing so, we will not only avoid essentializing an entire racial group but also contribute to larger theoretical concerns in sociolinguistics regarding how language varies and why.

In addition to expanding the study of AAL to think about variation across more dimensions of identity, we need to consider that variation can emerge across linguistic domains that have been understudied in the AAL literature. Considerations of regional identity motivated the study of regional sound changes in AAL despite conflicting assumptions about whether African Americans were undergoing such changes. While the earliest assumptions presumed that African Americans did not differ from their white counterparts (Kurath 1949), later generalizations presumed that they were not adopting local norms (Labov 2001). However, the deep consideration of regionality has shown that African Americans do recruit local sound changes into speech and has refuted the idea that only white speakers make use of these variables. Work of this type continues to disrupt the one-to-one mapping between racial categories and racialized language (Becker 2014; Childs 2005; King 2016, 2018). Thus, committing to observing variables beyond AAVE is beneficial for constructing theory around race and language.

Observations of other kinds of linguistic features (especially sociophonetic ones) beyond vowels will continue to advance our theories of identity and sociolinguistics. Investigations of prosody in African Americans' speech have revisited older debates in AAL like the convergence versus divergence controversy (Thomas & Carter 2006). The examination of consonantal features like /t/ release in Condoleezza Rice's speech has elucidated concepts of style shifting and persona management in the construction of her public professional identity (Podesva et al. 2012). Further, investigations of voice quality features like falsetto among African Americans in Washington, DC, have suggested that African American women draw on this resource when taking stances on matters that implicate race (Podesva 2016). Continued investigations of these understudied features and others beyond sociophonetics will further expand our description of African Americans' speech (Thomas & Carter 2006) while moving third-wave sociolinguistic theory forward.

Though I advocate for the study of understudied variables, this need not be to the exclusion of the canonical features of AAVE. In fact, it would benefit the field to study the social meaning of AAVE variables beyond race and to study how these features covary or pattern together stylistically with other types of variables. This kind of research still falls under the larger goals of understanding how styles become racialized and identifying which features contribute to that process of racialization.

3.3. Social Justice Aims for the Researchers and the Researched

In addition to the sociopolitical aim of expanding African Americans' social and linguistic representation, considerations of AAL's trajectory need to include a discussion of the field's social justice efforts. The foundational aim of studying AAVE was to correct the linguistic discrimination faced by speakers of the dialect. To that end, linguists have followed the articulation of this discrimination across educational, legal, employment, and housing contexts, lending their expertise to public discourses around the dialect (Baugh 2001; Charity Hudley 2008; Jones et al. 2019; Labov 2010; Rickford 1997a,b; Rickford & King 2016; Terry et al. 2015; Wolfram 2012). Linguists have also argued for the recruitment and mentorship of more African American scholars to study AAL (Charity Hudley 2017, King & Rosa 2019, Rickford 1997b, Wolfram 1993). Relatedly, the consideration of community members as researchers has become increasingly important; this framing empowers them to own and tell their narratives about their communities. Under this model, Charity Hudley (2017, p. 9) writes, "both linguistic and racial ideology are co-constructed and co-negotiated between researcher, individual, and community. As such, the emphasis is on what the individual, group, race, and/or culture value and see as crucial to the investigation of language, as well as linguistic social justices." Charity Hudley argues that this kind of engagement has been modeled through community research projects like the North Carolina Life and Language Project, which emphasizes the voices of community members in sharing their knowledge about the dialectal diversity across the state. If we consider the lack of African American speakers' participation in the process of constructing AAL a kind of epistemic injustice (Dotson 2014), then affording them more involvement in the process of knowledge production can atone for this offense.

4. CONCLUSION

Changes in approaches to the study of AAL reflect changes in conceptualizing race and language. This implicates the ways in which we study, define, and name African Americans' speech. The transition from AAVE to AAL has shown that we are moving beyond focusing on a singular language performance among African Americans and realizing the multiplicity of these performances

across and within speakers. Our transformed approach acknowledges the need to update our descriptions and informs discussions about how racial identity is constituted in both production and perception through various kinds of social and language practices across different communities. Further, recognizing how racial identity is informed by other dimensions of identity including region, class, gender, and more specific communities of practice or locally specific distinctions provides a means to conduct more nuanced observations of the relationship between language and identity and thus contribute to sociolinguistic theory and critical theory more broadly.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Errata

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