

**WILLIAM LABOV**

# **UNENDANGERED DIALECT, ENDANGERED PEOPLE: THE CASE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH**

---

---

*African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not an endangered language variety; on the contrary, it is continuing to develop, as all languages, and to diverge from other varieties. The primary correlates of such divergence are residential segregation and poverty, which are part of a developing transgenerational cycle that includes also crime, shorter life spans, and low educational achievement. The most immediate challenge is creating more effective educational programs on a larger scale. In confronting residential segregation, we must be aware that its reduction will lead to greater contact between speakers of AAVE and speakers of other dialects. Recent research implies that, if residential integration increases significantly, AAVE as a whole may be in danger of losing its distinctiveness as a linguistic resource. While many of us would regret a decrease in the eloquent syntactic and semantic options of AAVE and its possible withering away, we must also consider that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than the endangerment AAVE speakers currently confront.*

**KEYWORDS:** African American Vernacular English (AAVE), dialect divergence, education, literacy, race/racism, segregation, language endangerment

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the 21st century, linguists are very much concerned with the rapid decline and disappearance of the majority of the world's languages, most of them subject to unequal treatment. Much of our effort is devoted to social change that can reverse this process. This report will deal with another aspect of inequality.<sup>1</sup> I will be looking at social factors that lead dialects to diverge, develop, and flourish, and forms of cultural diversity that need no help to survive. In the final summary, I will have to say that I wish the world were otherwise, because this flourishing dialect is closely associated with the oppression, discouragement, and death of its speakers.

The argument of this paper may be outlined as follows:

- African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not an endangered dialect; on the contrary, it is continuing to develop and diverge from other dialects.

- The primary condition for such divergence is residential segregation.
- Residential segregation, combined with increasing poverty, has led to a deterioration of many features of social life in the inner cities.
- In these conditions, a majority of children in inner city schools are failing to learn to read, with a developing cycle of poverty, crime, and shorter life span.
- Reduced residential segregation will lead to greater contact between speakers of AAVE and speakers of other dialects.
- If, at some future date, the social conditions that favor the divergence of AAVE are altered, then AAVE in its present form may become an endangered dialect.

## **THE UNENDANGERED DIALECT**

Among all the nonstandard dialects that have been described in the history of linguistics, AAVE is the most closely and extensively studied. (Note that there is also a standard variety of African American English. See, e.g., Spears 2007.) From the mid 1960s to the present, studies of its invariant and variable features have been published for urban speech communities throughout the United States (New York: Labov 1972; Labov et al. 1968; Detroit: Edwards 1992; Wolfram 1969; Philadelphia: Ash and Myhill 1986; Labov and Harris 1986; Washington, DC: Fasold 1972; the Bay area: Mitchell-Kernan 1969; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1993; Rickford et al. 1991; Los Angeles: Baugh 1979, 1983, 1984, 1999; Legum et al. 1972; Columbus: Weldon 1994). Regional differences have appeared in only a few phonological features. (In cities with r-ful White vernaculars, African Americans show lower levels of r-vocalization than in cities with r-less vernaculars, Myhill 1988.) AAVE emerges as a geographically uniform system with the following general characteristics:

First, AAVE maintains a fairly uniform sound system, based on a modification of the Southern States vowel pattern, and does not participate in sound changes characteristic of surrounding White vernaculars. It is acknowledged that all living lan-

guages change over time, sometimes very slowly, sometimes more rapidly. In New York City, African Americans were found to be shifting the nucleus of /ay/ in *why*, *wide*, et cetera to the front, while in the White population, a new and vigorous change was moving the vocalic nucleus further and further back of center (Labov 1966, 1994). In Philadelphia, the fronting of /aw/ is an absolute differentiator of White and Black speech patterns, so that in an experimental study the controlled raising of the second formant of /aw/ in *out* and *house* converted the perceived identity of the speaker from Black to White (Graff et al. 1986). At Calumet College in Chicago, African Americans showed no tendency to participate in the Northern Cities Shift—the raising of /æ/, fronting of /o/ and backing of /e/—characteristic of the White population (Gordon 2000). In cities of the North, the Midland and the West, such phonetic patterns immediately differentiate the speech of African Americans from that of the local Whites.

Second, several phonological constraints on leniting sound changes are aligned with those operating in other English dialects but operate at higher frequencies. The alignment of AAVE with general sociolinguistic variables was first demonstrated in the study of auxiliary and copula deletion, where deletion was found to be governed by the same constraints as contraction in other dialects (Labov 1969). The major grammatical constraints on copula/auxiliary deletion are replicated regularly in many different geographic areas, with future tense favoring deletion over progressive over following locative/adjective over following noun phrase (e.g., Rickford et al. 1991).<sup>2</sup>

A similar alignment is found with the simplification of coronal clusters. The higher quantitative level in AAVE compared with other dialects is largely due to a qualitative difference in the effect of following pause on simplification. In AAVE, following pauses favor simplification, while in other dialects this environment has a disfavoring effect on simplification, resulting in higher overall rates of simplification in AAVE (Guy 1980).

Third, several morphosyntactic features present in most varieties of English are absent in the underlying grammar of AAVE. Quantitative and qualitative differences between AAVE and other dialects are illustrated in Figure 1, based on a study of 287 elementary school children in low-income schools (Labov 2001; Labov and Baker 2008). These children are a random sample of recordings of a larger group of 721 struggling readers. They were recorded in a relatively formal situation, in a school setting, but with sociolinguistic techniques that shift speech style toward the vernacular. For all four variables, the vertical axis represents the percent absence of the consonant involved. The differences among the four language/ethnic groups are quantitative for -t,d deletion and copula absence but qualitative for absence of attribute possessive {s} and third-singular {s}. For -t,d deletion, Blacks and Latinos show 55–65 percent absence and Whites 40 percent; for copula absence, Blacks and Latinos are clustered at a much lower level, and Whites are close to zero. In contrast, the Black children are close to 70 percent absence for attributive possessive {s} and verbal {s}, far different from Latinos and completely different from Whites.

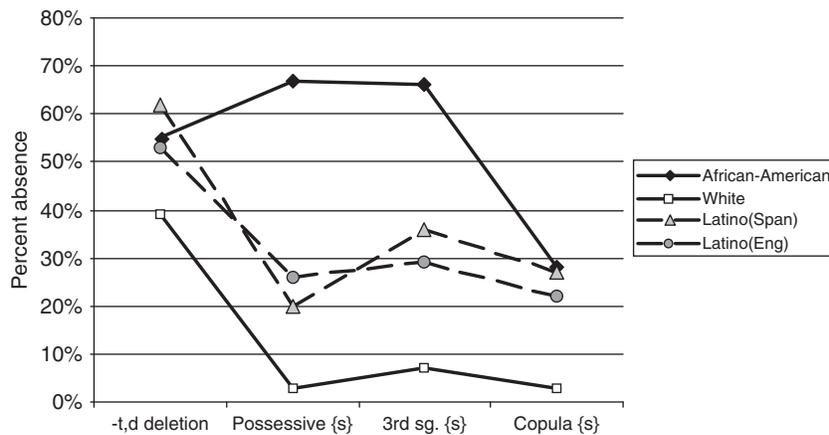


Figure 1. Percent absence for four linguistic variables for African-American elementary school children in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and California by language and ethnic-group ( $N = 287$ ). Latino(Span), Latinos who learned to read in Spanish first; Latino(Eng), Latinos who learned to read in English first.

Fourth, variable past tense marking due to high levels of consonant cluster simplification is reinforced by the use of *had* as a past tense marker. The earliest studies of the 1960s detected occasional use of the past perfect as simple past (Labov et al. 1968). In Springville, Texas, Cukor-Avila (1995) found an explosive growth of this feature in both apparent and real-time. In all White dialects, the auxiliary *had* indicates that the event so marked occurred before the event last referenced. In current AAVE, auxiliary *had* occurs freely in semantic contexts where the marked event follows the preceding one. The speakers in Cukor-Avila's study born before World War I showed no trace of this feature, while for those in the youngest group, born after 1970, innovative *had* was the predominant form.

The ways in which AAVE is expanding and flourishing appear most clearly in the semantics of mood and aspect. The examples that I cite here have a dual import, showing on the one hand the evolution of new semantic possibilities, and on the other hand the eloquent application of these possibilities in social interaction.

Fifth, unique mood and aspect categories have developed with new semantic features. Bailey and Maynor (1985) trace the dramatic rise in the use of habitual *be* as a percentage of all progressives with habitual meaning, from speakers born in the 19th century to modern times. This quantitative development has been confirmed in the study of East Palo Alto by Rickford and McNair-Knox (1993).

The combination of (*will*) *be* with perfect/intensive *done* has been co-opted in AAVE to signal the compound tense equivalent to the future perfect (*will have*) of other dialects. In this case, *will have*, or *be done* is used to signal the first of two future events, as in the following:

(1) They be done drunk up all the wine by the time you get there.

In 1983, Baugh observed a confrontation in the Los Angeles suburb Pacoima, where an angry parent threatened a pool guard who he thought had man-handled his son:

(2) I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again.

This is not equivalent to a future perfect, since *I'll have killed that motherfucker if he tries . . .* does not make sense. Here *be done* is attached to the second member of two future events, rather than the first. The new resultative *be done*, as analyzed by Baugh (1983), is a marker of mood, indicating the high degree of certainty with which event B follows event A. (2) is not easily translated into any tense, mood, or aspect combination used in other dialects.

The semantic content of this combination is not simply that B will follow A, but that B will inevitably follow A. Spears (1985, 1990, 2009) analyzes *be done* as one of the set of disapproval markers in AAVE, expressing not inevitability, but the intended rapidness of the reactive event B, following a strongly disapproved event A (his trying to lay a hand on my kid again).

These are only two of the new mood and aspect features of AAVE, which include *come*, *go*, and *go come*, expressing strong disapproval (Spears 1982, 1990, 2009); frequentative-iterative *stay* (Spears 2000, 2009); remote present perfect *been* (Rickford 1973) and many other new and productive combinations (Dayton 1996).

## THE GREAT MIGRATION AND RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

Bailey 1993 argues that the development of modern AAVE is contemporaneous with the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to large cities, primarily in the North. The grammatical developments we have traced are essentially characteristics of these large urban speech communities, where African Americans are heavily concentrated in homogeneous neighborhoods.

For White immigrant groups, residential segregation is a by-product of the initial movement of a population into a new city. An immigrant group will follow a path of decreasing residential concentration over time as members obtain jobs, sometimes intermarry, and generally assimilate to American society. This has been the case for many immigrant groups, as shown in Table 1, taken from Hershberg's studies of the history of Philadelphia (Hershberg et al. 1981). Irish, Germans, Italians, and Poles all show a regular decline in the index of dominance, which is the proportion of a person's census tract that consists of the same group. The trajectory of African Americans is just the reverse in these data. Starting in 1850, the index of dominance for African Ameri-

Table 1. Indices of dominance for five ethnic groups in Philadelphia from 1850 to 1970 (proportion of a person's census tract that consists of the same group).

	1850	1880	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Blacks	11	12	35	45	56	72	74
Irish		34	8			5	3
German	25	11			5	3	
Italian		38			23	21	
Polish		20			9	8	

Source: Hershberg et al. (1986), table 8.

cans steadily rises to its maximum in 1970, the last year reported on. This pattern is not peculiar to Philadelphia. Massey and Denton (1993) show a spectacular rise in residential segregation for all major American cities from 1930 to 1970. They argue that the high level of residential segregation is a root cause of the many other social problems that afflict the African American community, closely related to poverty rate, residential segregation, crime rate rises, the percent of female-headed families, and the percent of high school students in the lowest 15th percentile.

### RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION AND THE CORE SPEAKERS OF AAVE

In the 1970s, we studied linguistic change and variation in the White community of Philadelphia (Labov 1980, 2001). All available evidence indicated that African Americans did not participate in the new and vigorous sound changes that characterized the Philadelphia vernacular: only a few older Blacks and isolated youth showed any tendency to adopt these sound changes in progress. In the 1980s, we carried out research in North Philadelphia and found a linguistic segregation that matched the high level of residential segregation we have just seen (Labov and Harris 1986).

The majority of the Black community who consistently showed the defining features of AAVE were those who stayed within the Black neighborhoods from one day to the other, worked only with Blacks, lived with and talked with Blacks, and rarely had face-to-face conversations with speakers of other dialects.<sup>3</sup> In the adult social networks of North

Philadelphia, we found a certain number of speakers who did not follow the AAVE grammatical pattern described above, but they were all people who, for one reason or another, had more extensive contact with Whites. This second group sounded very much like the first on the surface, and used the same vocabulary and phonetics, but they showed in their inflectional variables the influence of contact with White grammars.

We also studied two groups of White speakers of both middle- and working-class background, one with extensive contacts with the African American community and one with very limited contact. Figure 2 shows the level of absence of three grammatical inflections for the four groups of speakers. The majority of Blacks with minimal White contacts show a very high degree of inflectional absence of possessive and verbal {s}, while Blacks with extensive contacts showed substantially lower levels of inflectional absence. Whites with extensive Black contacts showed little tendency to shift their grammar in this direction.

The consistency of the core group reflects the general findings of Milroy (1980) that speakers engaged in dense multiplex social networks in their own community resist linguistic change from outside, while those with many weak ties to other social groups are subject to the influence of those groups. The other side of the coin is that within the core group of Blacks, linguistic change has accelerated, in both the tense/mood/aspect system and the morphosyntactic reflections of grammatical categories. Dense and multiplex networks are of course a concomitant of residential segregation.

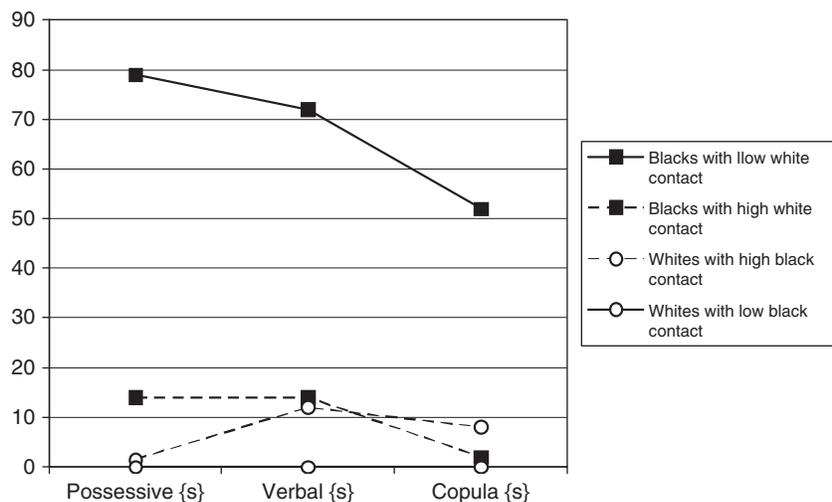


Figure 2. Percent absence of three morphological features of standard English by race and degree of contact across racial groups in North Philadelphia. Source: Ash and Myhill (1986).

One might argue that the African American youth in these core areas are not isolated from other dialects: that they are exposed to more standard speech through the mass media or from their school teachers. But a great deal of evidence indicates that passive exposure of this type does not affect speech patterns or underlying grammars (Labov et al. 2006). As far as we know, language changes occur in the course of verbal interaction among speakers who track each other's utterances for appropriate responses at possible sentence completion points (Sacks 1992). African American children in core areas do not have the opportunity to engage in such conversations with speakers of other dialects.

**THE MINORITY GAP IN READING**

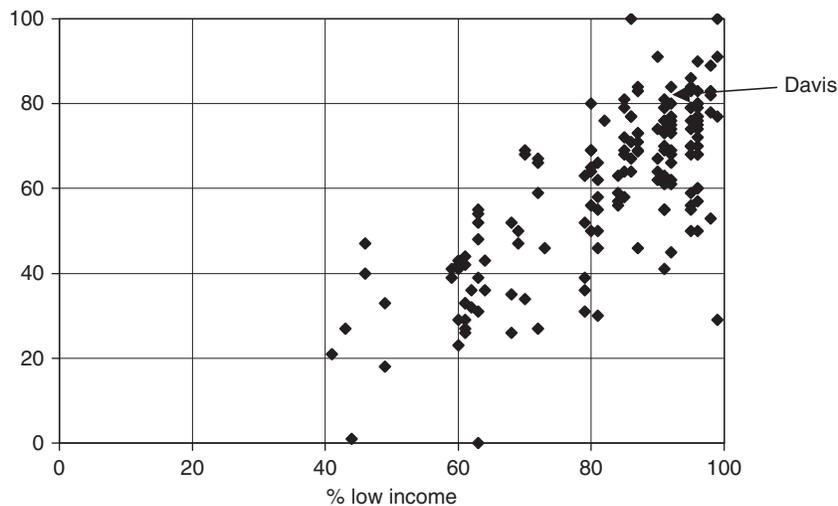
The first research on AAVE that we conducted in 1965–68 was supported by the Office of Education, designed to find out if there was any connection, between dialect differences and the minority gap in reading. In the yearly reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007) since 1971, the minority gap in reading proficiency levels has remained large and stable. In the most recent figures, only a small proportion of African American fourth graders, 13 percent, are rated as proficient, that is, able to use reading as a tool for further learning.

When we examine the situation at the local level in Philadelphia, a further relationship appears between poverty and low reading levels. Figure 3 is a scattergram of all Philadelphia schools at the time when we first began our efforts to raise reading levels. Each point registers on the vertical axis the

percent of students performing at the lowest quartile of the state-wide PSSA reading test, and on the horizontal axis, the percent of students who qualify for free lunch as their family income falls below the poverty line. The symbol labeled “Davis” is the elementary school where we have worked most consistently in the period since 1997. It is evident that there is a direct relation between poverty and reading achievement.

**THE RELATION BETWEEN SPEECH AND READING**

The data for Figure 1 was drawn from an analysis of the spontaneous speech of 287 struggling readers in the second through fourth grades who were the subjects of our interventions in three regions of the United States. The same data can be used to examine the relationship between the use of AAVE variables in spontaneous speech and decoding success in oral reading. We can expect of course that there will be a correlation between the realization of each of these variables in speech and in oral reading. Table 2 shows that a moderate but significant correlation between reading errors and those features that are specific to speakers of AAVE. The first column shows the correlation between the absence of each feature in spontaneous speech and absence in oral reading of a diagnostic text. The fact that there is such a correlation is not remarkable, because the vernacular deletion of these apical inflections is in the first analysis indistinguishable from an oral reading error.<sup>4</sup> However, the third column of Table 2 shows that the same degree of correlation exists



**Figure 3. Percent readers in the bottom quartile of PSSA reading scores in the 5th grade of Philadelphia schools (1997) by percent of low-income students.**

Table 2. Pearson correlations between spontaneous speech and reading for four AAVE variables.

	With grammatical variable in oral reading	With mean phonological error rate
Consonant clusters	.16*	.10*
Third singular {s}	.15*	.18**
Possessive {s}	.28***	.14*
Copula {s}	.15*	.21***

$N = 287$ . \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

between the AAVE speech variables and the mean error rate in decoding all orthographic aspects of onsets, nuclei and codas.<sup>5</sup> This indicates a global relationship between the use of AAVE and decoding problems. The relationship is not necessarily a direct one, as there are many intervening factors that are likely to be responsible for a high use of AAVE and low performance in decoding. Before we explore these, we must consider an unexpected finding on regional differences.

#### DIFFERENCES BY REGION

In the many studies of AAVE published so far, no major regional differences in the grammar have appeared (Baugh 1983; Labov et al. 1968; Rickford et al. 1991).<sup>6</sup> However, if we break down the data for African Americans in Figure 1 into three regional groups, some surprising differences appear. Figure 4 shows that Atlanta and Philadelphia have the highest simplification of consonant clusters and absence of possessive attributive {s} and that Atlanta has even higher absence of third singular {s} and copula {s} than Philadelphia. On the other hand, the California subjects are considerably lower than the other two regions for all four variables. If residential segregation were an essential component for the full development of the vernacular, we would expect to find a lesser degree of segregation in the West. However, Massey and Denton (1993) show that Los Angeles is not less segregated than any of the other large cities, and all schools were selected by the same socioeconomic criterion—the percent of low-income families who qualify for the federal free lunch program. Why then should our California sample show a lower frequency of the defining AAVE features?

We examined the racial distribution of students for all the schools involved in Philadelphia and Atlanta, including the relations of Latinos, Whites, and Blacks. With the help of John Rickford, we were able to include a number of schools in the Bay Area of California, and we later added schools in Southern California, in the Long Beach area. Figure 5

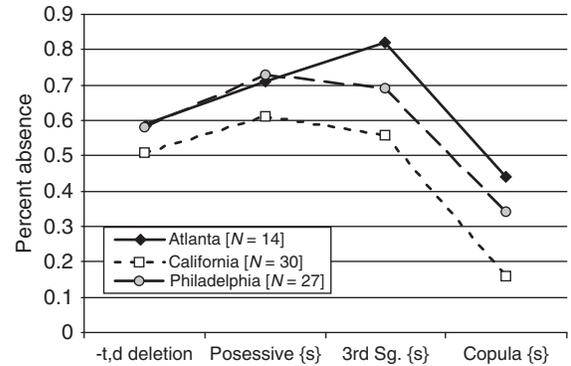


Figure 4. Four morphosyntactic variables of AAVE for African American struggling readers by region.

displays the proportions of African Americans to Latinos on the horizontal axis, and the proportions of African Americans to Whites on the vertical axis. Each axis shows the log ratio of African Americans to the other group. The 0 rating on each axis is therefore the point where there is an equal mixture of the two groups that is a ratio of 1:1. The schools with the most extreme segregation are at upper right, where the numbers next to each symbol indicate the overall percentage of African Americans: 90 and 93 percent. No California schools show such a high concentration. The five schools in the lower left quadrant have relatively low ratios of African Americans to Whites and Latinos: there are no Philadelphia or Atlanta schools in this quadrant. It appears then that the lower frequency of AAVE characteristics in the California schools is a direct reflection of the lower concentrations of Black students.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AAVE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

Figure 6 models the development of AAVE within the framework of residential segregation, symbolized by the Black rectangle. AAVE is shown as the product of its history, which begins outside of that framework, in plantations and small towns of the South (Bailey 1993, 2001) and in the earlier less segregated areas of the Northern cities. The 20th century developments of AAVE discussed in the first part of this paper occurred in conjunction with the other social conditions outlined in Figure 6. The first and overarching condition is the degree of poverty as indicated at upper left with its interlocking relationships with other forms of social pathology. Unemployment is of course the primary cause of poverty: Unemployment rates for young Black men who have not graduated high school have recently been reported at 72 percent, as opposed to

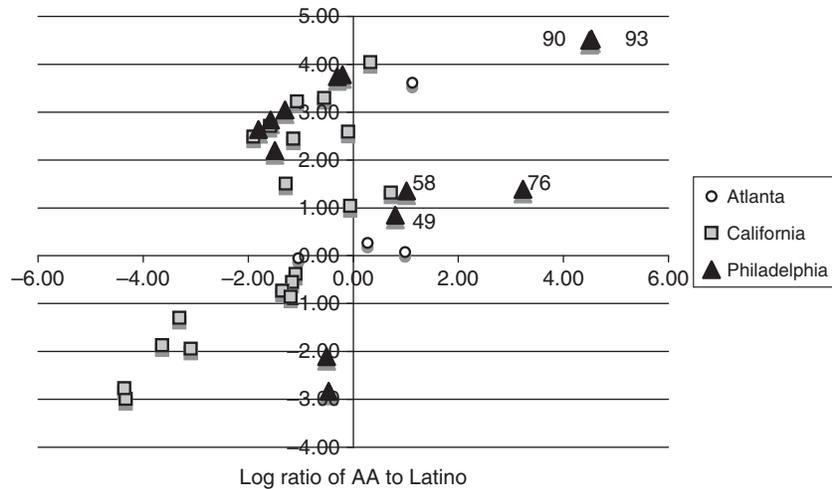


Figure 5. Concentration of African Americans in schools in Atlanta, California and Philadelphia in which the students of Figure 1 were interviewed. Numbers next to Philadelphia schools in upper right quadrant are percent African American in the student body.

19 percent for the corresponding population of Latino youth (Eckholm 2006). Unemployment, underemployment, and poverty jointly reduce or eliminate the economic base for the Black family. Inability to participate in the formal, legal economy leads directly to participation in the informal, illegal economy with a rapid increase in crime rates—the link shown at lower left. The incarceration rate of young Black males has tripled in two decades, rising from two percent per year in 1981 to almost six percent in 2002 (Holzer et al. 2004). Coupled with increasing reinforcement of child support laws, young Black males are removed from the formal economy during and after their prison terms. The

economic base of the largely female-headed Black family is then further eroded.

Poverty in the inner city also affects the quality of schooling. Many of the schools we have worked in have a severe shortage of books, texts, and art supplies, and most critical of all, teachers. One school we have worked with most closely in our intervention programs has lost four teachers this year through budget cuts, so that in two classrooms, second- and third-grade students will be combined. Underfunding of schools plainly contributes to inadequate instruction and—no matter what instruction is used—to reading failure. The cycle closes as reading failure leads to further unemploy-

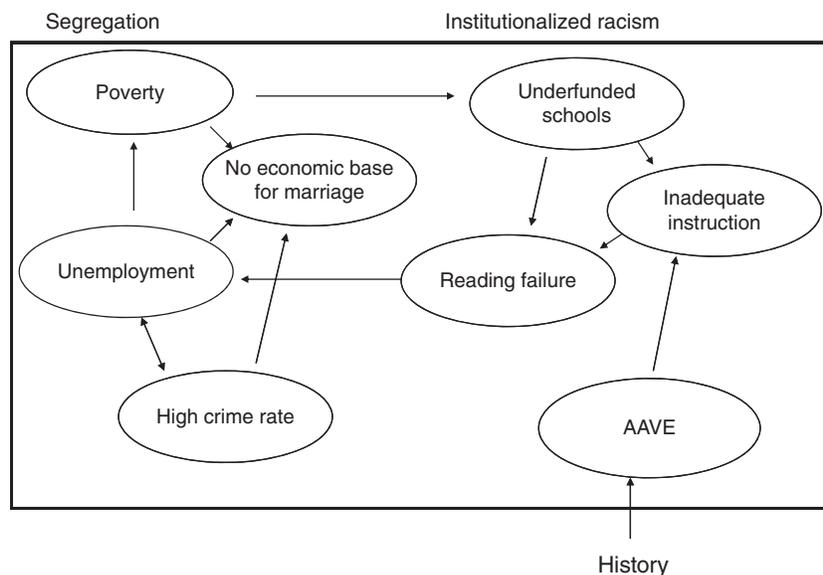


Figure 6. Model of the development of African American Vernacular English in the framework of residential segregation.

ment. Because the majority of children in the schools of Figure 6 are reading below Basic level in the fifth grade, and cannot use reading to obtain information content in their other subjects, it is not likely that they will be able to graduate from high school without further intervention. Reading failure reinforces the cycle of poverty, unemployment, and crime.

A relationship of AAVE to inadequate instruction is indicated on figure 6. Since the Ann Arbor decision (Labov 1982; Smitherman 1981), it has generally been agreed that teachers need to know more about children's home language to be effective teachers of reading. How this can best be done is the major focus of our current research (Labov 2001, 2003; Labov and Baker 2008). Whether our efforts will be effective enough to cut into the pattern shown in Figure 6 is a question still to be resolved over time. This paper has addressed a distinct, but closely related question: what are the social conditions under which AAVE has developed, flourished and become increasingly differentiated from other dialects of American English?

A major strategy of our intervention efforts is to respond in a meaningful way to the real-life situation of the children we are dealing with, who are all affected by the cycle of Figure 6. Many of the narratives I have written for our Individualized Reading Program deal with conflict between students and the school, and the injustice that children see in the world around them. In contrast, most of the standard school-reading materials deal with a happy, anodyne, and irrelevant world in which children take their sand buckets to the beach and dip their toes in the water. By the time they reach the fourth grade, most of our students are alienated from the reading process as they have known it and from the institution of education as a whole. Their rejection of the school as an institution is similar to the position of the adolescent Jets and Cobras of the 1960s, who saw the school system as a form of institutionalized racism (Labov et al. 1968). There is a generalized level of anger that may surface at any moment, expressed primarily in fighting with their fellow students rather than overt hostility to the teacher. Many of our most promising students were forced to drop out of our program when they were suspended for fighting.

It is therefore important to get a clear idea of the social condition that generates these powerful emotions. A study of two individuals may be helpful.

#### **AN ANGRY FOURTH GRADER**

Riana was a fourth grader when she entered the Individualized Reading Program. She scored in the 35th national percentile in the Woodcock-Johnson Word Attack subtest, in the 13th percentile in the Word

Identification subtest and in the 16th percentile on Passage Comprehension. On our analysis of decoding skills, she had more than 10 percent errors for 12 out of the 20 phoneme/grapheme relations; 10 percent is the benchmark we have adopted for remedial instruction. In addition to these reading tests, we recorded the spontaneous speech of all of our students in that year, using the sociolinguistic techniques that have been found to stimulate the flow of speech for children everywhere (asking such questions as "Did you ever get blamed for something you didn't do?" "Is there any place in your neighborhood that's really scary?" "Did you ever get into a fight with someone bigger than you?"). Riana talked very freely about the fights she had been in.

I was in my old school and I was used to fightin' an' stuff. I only fought two times in this school. And I ain't never get in trouble but in the old school I got suspended three times. That's when I was a real fighter and I liked to fight a lot but I on't—I try not to fight a lot and I told this—I told one of the teachers I said I was gonna punch her in her face. . . . Uh—I say anything when I'm mad. When I get real real mad I just say anything. I don't be meaning it but I just say it. It then come out—anything comes out my mouth then but no curse words did . . . Anything else I say I'm going to do something to somebody but it comes out my mouth only—only say that when I'm mad I don't—like—I don't mean to say it. It just come out my mouth when I'm real real angry at people.

We often ask kids about scary places. Riana's answer did not deal with imaginary fears, but with a real situation.

Tutor: Is there any place that you know about that's really scary? Some place you wouldn't want to go?

Riana: Jail.

Tutor: How come?

Riana: 'Cause . . . it's a lot of people there that—that—a lot of thieves there and the police don't care what they do long as they stay in them jail. As long as they stay in the bars they don't care what they do. And then . . . long as they don't call the police in they don't care what they do long as they ain't doing nothing to the police. And they might take your food like if you there—you had to go there—they might—and they have their own food—they own plate of food—they might—they want yours and they snatch yours from you and they'll beat you up there.

Tutor: How do you know so much about jails?

Riana: My—my dad is in jail.

The tutor had no intention of talking about jail; up to this point, she did not know that Riana's dad was in jail. Without further reflection, she pursued the point.

Tutor: Do you ever go and visit your dad?

Riana: I never did . . . [sigh] I never saw him—the last time I saw my dad was . . . I was in second grade and I was going on a trip. He—he brought me money. That was the last time I saw him.

Tutor: Do you know does he get out soon?

Riana: I don't know.

Tutor: You don't know.

Riana: I don't think so. I—I've keep writing notes—I wrote my—I wrote—uh—I wrote—we write to each other. . . . He say he gon give me a—he say he gon give me a tape—he gon mail me a tape with him on there reading 'cuz I suh—'cuz at they jail I supposed to come there every week so we could do like a parent—a father and daughter—uh—reading.

Riana's sighs are audible. Her manner is reflective and sad.

Riana: So—and—he say he gon send me a tape with him readin' on it. It's cuz instead—since I can't read then—since we can't see each other a lot—I never saw my dad in there—for a long long time. I think I saw—the last time I saw him was last year. My last birthday and it wasn't—not on my June—not on this—the June twenty-seven that already came up. The one the buh—before that . . . And I didn't get—that's the last time I saw him. And he came to my birthday party . . . [sighs]

Bad as Riana's situation may be, it is better than that of seven-year-old Latasha. She begins her portrait of her daily life by her conflict with her mother, who has been trying to keep Latasha off the street.

I got in trouble because my mom said "Don't go with your friends" and when I came back she said "Where you went?" I said "With my friends" and I got in trouble. Then I was on punishment for a whole week. As soon as I came from school I had to stay in the house. No T.V. No radio. Nothing. I just had to lay on my beds and read books. Then the weeks passed and I started to be good. But then I got bad and I went with my friends again. And I got snatched and I came home breathing and stuff. And my mom's like "What's wrong with you?" I was like "I got chased by somebody." She said "Oh. One more time you do that, you really on punishment." So I had to go in my room again. I started crying. Then I had to come downstairs. Eat dinner.

I spilled my juice on the rug, then had to go in my room a extra time, 'cuz she was gonna let me out again but now I had to stay in my room for a whole three weeks. And I just sat on my bed. I sat on my bed and I cried. And I read books.

Like Riana, Latasha is considered the worst girl in her class, and she finds herself blamed for many things she did not do.

Well, I used to be bad—I used to be bad in first grade and kindergarten. And then when they come to second grade and stuff they always blame me stuff cuz they know I always do that but I always be good in second grade. I used to be bad in first and kindergarten cuz it wasn't really nothing to do, so I just be bad. And when they come to second grade they always blame stuff on me and it's not fair to me, because the other person that's doing it they get stuff that I posed to get and they get it. And like yesterday I got blamed, because some girl hit somebody and they were jumping her and thought it was me and my friends. Me and my cousin and my friend, they always blame stuff on us and that—and that's not right. And I tell my mom and my mom don't do nothing. She just said "Be good." I try to be good but they always blame stuff on me. It seem like I'm the baddest one in my classroom but I try to be good. And they blame me all the time. And probably on my report card I'll probably get an "F" in behavior 'cuz they always blame me . . . and it's not fair to me.

Outside of school, neighborhood conflicts are intense. Latasha's brother and her cousin were shot dead a year ago, and she is still obliged to defend their memory.

Like my brother and my cousin dead and they kept on talking about them, so I gotta fight with 'em. One of 'em was ten and one of them was nine . . . Well my brother's dead right? And my brother used to smoke cigarettes and it was some little girl, she a fake Muslim. She go to this school. Her name Diamond and her sister is Deborah and they always talk about my brother cuz they said "That's why your brother dead cuz he was smoking cigarettes on the corner and stuff, having guns and stuff." And my brother he do not have guns. All the people they say my brother was a peacemaker. And they kept on talking about my brother and I just got in a fight with 'em.

At seven, Latasha has not lost her hope for some better outcome.

That's why I wanna be in some other world—not other world, but I wanna be in some other country 'cuz around my way, it's drama around my way and a lot of people don't like it around there. I'm not a scared of 'em but I just want to move.

Latasha can still imagine a future in the formal economy, if she could make her way through high school.

I wanna be a doctor but it's—I be watching T.V. It seem like it's nasty to be a doctor. I'll be a nurse. A dentist.

Riana and Latasha are not exceptional cases. The uncontrollable anger that they feel, which will inevitably lead to their suspension from school, is the product of a despair that is not known to children outside the ghetto, but is commonplace within it. Mauer (1995) reports that one in three Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 is either in jail or prison, or on parole or probation: these are their children. The stories that I write for them are quite remote from the happy tales that are written for suburban readers; they reflect—but only to a small degree—the reality of a world where the best we can do is to register a protest against the unfairness of it all.

Our tutoring program made significant progress with the children in Riana's class in 2001, and the four years that followed. But the size of the problem is staggering. Of the 156 schools in Philadelphia, 141 are in the bottom quintile on the state achievement test. So far, we have worked with only a dozen of them. Philadelphia is one of a long list of the hyper-segregated speech communities: this is the norm for all large American cities. And the problem of reading failure is everywhere.

#### **EXPANDING THE READING PROGRAM**

For this reason, we must consider educational programs on a larger scale. The educational establishment has made some progress in the recognition of the special problems of African American youth. The California Curriculum Commission has introduced new requirements for language arts programs to be listed for approval in 2008: "additional support for students who use AAVE who may have difficulty with phonological awareness and standard academic English structures of oral and written language, including spelling and grammar" (456). We need to specify just what is meant by AAVE here, and what language features have to be taken into account in teaching reading and writing. A Summary Statement

on AAVE was submitted in November 2006 to the Curriculum Commission, signed by myself, H. Samy Alim, Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Lisa Green, John R. Rickford, Tracey Weldon, and Walt Wolfram.

The linguistic and sociolinguistic insights of the tutoring program have been developed into a full remedial language arts program for children in grades four through eight who are two or more years behind in reading achievement, focusing on all low-income schools including those with large African American and Latino populations. This *Portals* program (Labov et al. 2010) has been approved by the California Curriculum Commission and is being used in California schools.

The Individualized Reading Program has now been further developed as The Reading Road and is implemented by The Penn Reading Initiative, a student-organized tutoring program that has brought several hundred undergraduates into this activity. Through its web site [www.ling.upenn.edu/pri](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/pri), this program is now being adopted at other universities and schools. There are many ways in which what I have written here may be misunderstood, and I would like to be clear in the conclusion. I have shown that AAVE has developed its present form in the framework of the most extreme racial segregation that the world has ever known. In no way have I suggested that AAVE is a cause of the problems of African American people. On the contrary, it is their great resource, an elegant form of expression that they use when they reflect most thoughtfully on the oppression and misery of daily life. "If you love your enemy, they be done ate you alive in this society" (African American woman in West Philadelphia, reported in Dayton 1996).

The great progress of the civil rights movement has given a large part of the Black population access to education and jobs, along with the means to move out of the inner city. There have been great gains. On the linguistic side, there is standard African American English in which the major features are phonological, like the merger of *pin* and *pen* (Henderson 2001), or camouflaged grammatical markers like the *come* of moral indignation (Spears 1982). If some forces in American society, perhaps led by Baugh's initiative on linguistic profiling (2000), were to make a major impact on residential segregation, then we would expect AAVE to shift some part of the distance toward other dialects, and we might then observe large scale convergence instead of continuing divergence.

If the mixed populations of our Philadelphia schools should actually be integrated, we may even reach a time when young Black children use elements

of the White vernacular, and take part in the radical sound changes that sweep over the White community. At that point, AAVE as a whole might be in danger of losing its own distinct and characteristic forms of speech. I am sure that many of us would regret the decline of the eloquent syntactic and semantic options that I have presented here. But we might also reflect at that time that the loss of a dialect is a lesser evil than the current condition of endangered people.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Georgetown Round Table 2006 in Washington, DC. This report develops the educational implications and programs that follow from our understanding of the status of AAVE and the speakers of this dialect.

2. Locative and adjectival environments are here combined, as in the original Harlem study (Labov et al. 1968) where these were found to be variable from one group to another. Cukor-Avila 1999 attributes this variability to varying proportions of stative and nonstative adjectives.

3. See also Baugh (1983) for a characterization of the vernacular on these dimensions.

4. See however Labov and Baker (2008) which resolves this problem.

5. These mean values are based on the error rates for 20 problematic relations of phonemes to graphemes in onsets, nuclei, and codas of a diagnostic reading.

6. Regional differences in pronunciation are not uncommon, principally in the degree of r-vocalization, and moderate reflections of the Southern Shift (Labov et al. 2005:chapter 22). See Myhill (1988) and Hinton and Pollock (2000) for regional differences in (r). The African American speech of East St. Louis is well known to have a centralized nucleus of/eh/r/in there and where.

William Labov, Professor of Linguistics, Director of the Linguistics Laboratory, University of Pennsylvania. His major work is on the study of linguistic change and social variation, and he has published the *Atlas of North American English*, with coauthors S. Ash and C. Boberg. Two volumes of *Principles of Linguistic Change* appeared in 1994 and 2001, and a third is appearing in 2010.

Labov's research on African American Vernacular English in Harlem is reported in *Language in the Inner City* (1972). He was the director of the NSF-funded Urban Minorities Reading Project from 2001 to 2005, which developed tutoring methods for African American, Latino, and white struggling

readers in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and California. He is the author of *The Reading Road*, designed to raise reading levels in low-income schools and senior author of the remedial language arts program *Portals*, Published by Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt in 2010. From 1998 to 2009, he has taught Academically Based Services Courses that are aimed at tutoring children in West Philadelphia schools.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Ash, Sharon, and John Myhill  
1986 Linguistic Correlates of Inter-ethnic Contact. *In Diversity and Diachrony*. D. Sankoff, ed. Pp. 33–44. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Bailey, Guy  
1993 A Perspective on African-American English. *In American Dialect Research*. Dennis Preston, ed. Pp. 287–318. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.  
2001 The Relationship between African-American Vernacular English and White Vernaculars in the American South. *In African American English: State of the Art*. Sonja Lanehart, ed. Pp. 53–92. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Bailey, Guy, and Natalie Maynor  
1985 The Present Tense of BE in Southern Black Folk Speech. *American Speech* 60:195–213.
- Baugh, John  
1979 Linguistic Style-Shifting in Black English. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.  
1983 *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure and Survival*. Austin: University of Texas Press.  
1984 Steady: Progressive Aspect in Black English. *American Speech* 50:3–12.  
1999 *Out of the Mouths of Slaves: African American Language and Educational Malpractice*. Austin: University of Texas Press.  
2000 *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cukor-Avila, Patricia  
1995 The Evolution of AAVE in a Rural Texas Community: An Ethnolinguistic Study. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.  
1999 Stativity and Copula Absence in AAVE: Grammatical Constraints at the Sub-Categorical Level. *Journal of English Linguistics* 27:341–355.

- Dayton, Elizabeth  
1996 Grammatical Categories of the Verb in African American Vernacular English. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Eckholm, Erik  
2006 Plight Deepens Black Men, *Studies Warn*. New York Times, March 20: A1.
- Edwards, Walter F.  
1992 Sociolinguistic Behavior in a Detroit Inner-City Black Neighborhood. *Language in Society* 21:93–115.
- Fasold, R. W.  
1972 *Tense Marking in Black English*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Fought, Carmen  
2003 *Chicano English in Context*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gordon, Matthew J.  
2000 Phonological Correlates of Ethnic Identity: Evidence of Divergence? *American Speech* 75:115–136.
- Graff, David, William Labov, and Wendell Harris  
1986 Testing Listeners' Reactions to Phonological Markers. In *Diversity and Diachrony*. D. Sankoff, ed. Pp. 45–58. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Guy, Gregory  
1980 Variation in the Group and the Individual: The Case of Final Stop Deletion. In *Locating Language in Time and Space*. W. Labov, ed. Pp. 1–36. New York: Academic Press.
- Henderson, Anita  
2001 Is Your Money Where Your Mouth Is?: Hiring Managers' Attitudes toward African-American Vernacular English. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Hershberg, Theodore, Alan N. Burstein, Eugene P. Erickson, Stephanie W. Greenberg, and William L. Yancey  
1981 A Tale of Three Cities: Black, Immigrants and Opportunity in Philadelphia: 1850–1880, 1930, 1970. In *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*. T. Hershberg, ed. Pp. 461–495. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hinton, Linette, and Karen Pollock  
2000 Regional Variations in the Phonological Characteristics of African-American Vernacular English. *Word Englishes* 19:59–71.
- Holzer, Harry, Paul Offner, and Elaine Sorensen  
2004 Declining Employment among Young Black Less-Educated Men: The Role of Incarceration and Child Support. Discussion paper, 1281-04. <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp128104.pdf>, accessed July 16, 2008.
- Labov, William  
1966 *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.  
1969 Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula. *Language* 45:715–762.  
1972 *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.  
1980 The Social Origins of Sound Change. In *Locating Language in Time and Space*. W. Labov, ed. Pp. 251–266. New York: Academic Press.  
1982 Objectivity and Commitment in Linguistic Science: The Case of the Black English Trial in Ann Arbor. *Language in Society* 11:165–202.  
2001 Applying Our Knowledge of African American English to the Problem of Raising Reading Levels in Inner-City Schools. In *African American English: State of the Art*. Sonja Lanehart, ed. Pp. 299–318. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.  
2003 When Ordinary Children Fail to Read. *Reading Research Quarterly* 38:131–133.
- Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg  
2006 *Atlas of North American English: Phonology and Sound Change*. Berlin: Mouton/de Gruyter.
- Labov, William, and Bettina Baker  
2008 The Individualized Reading Program. <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/UMRP/UMRP.html>. Accessed July 16, 2008.
- Labov, William, P. Cohen, C. Robins, and J. Lewis  
1968 A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City. Cooperative Research Report 3288, vols. 1 and 2, Philadelphia: U.S. Regional Survey, Linguistics Laboratory, University of Pennsylvania.
- Labov, William, and Wendell A. Harris  
1986 De Facto Segregation of Black and White Vernaculars. In *Diversity and Diachrony*. D. Sankoff, ed. Pp. 1–24. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

- Labov, William, I. Soto-Hinman, S. Dickson, A. Charity Hudley, & B. Thorsnes  
 2010 *Portals to Reading: Intensive Intervention*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Legum, Stanley, Carol Pfaff, G. Tinnie, and M. Nicholas  
 1972 *The Speech of Young Black Children in Los Angeles*. Technical Publication 33. Inglewood, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory.
- Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton  
 1993 *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mauer, Mark  
 1995 *Young Black Americans and the Criminal Justice System: Five Years Later*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- Milroy, Leslie  
 1980 *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia  
 1969 *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community*. Monographs of the Language-Behavior Research Laboratory No. 2. Berkeley: University of California.
- Myhill, John  
 1988 Postvocalic/r/as an Index of Integration into the BEV Speech Community. *American Speech* 63:203–213.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress  
 2007 *The Nation's Report Card*. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>, accessed July 16, 2008.
- Rickford, John  
 1973 Carrying the New Wave into Syntax: The Case of Black English Bin. In *Analyzing Variation in Language*. R. Fasold and R. Shuy, eds. Pp. 162–183. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Rickford, John R., Arnetha Ball, Renee Blake, Raina Jackson, and Nomi Martin  
 1991 Rappin on the Copula Coffin: Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Copula Variation in African-American Vernacular English. *Language Variation and Change* 3:103–132.
- Rickford, John R., and Faye McNair-Knox  
 1993 Addressee- and Topic-Influenced Style Shift: A Quantitative Sociolinguistic Study. In *Perspectives on Register: Situating Register Variation within Sociolinguistics*. D. Biber and E. Finegan, eds. Pp. 235–276. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sacks, Harvey  
 1992 *Lectures on Conversation*, vols. 1 and 2. Gail Jefferson (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smitherman, Geneva, ed.  
 1981 *Black English and the Education of Black Children and Youth: Proceedings of the National Invitational Symposium on the KING Decision*. Detroit: Center for Black Studies, Wayne State University.
- Spears, Arthur K.  
 1982 The Black English Semi-Auxiliary *Come*. *Language* 58:850–72.  
 1985 Review of *Black Street Speech: Its History, Origin, and Structure*, by John Baugh. *Language in Society* 14.1:101–108.  
 1990 The Grammaticalization of Disapproval in Black American English. In *CUNY-Forum: Papers in Linguistics*, vol. 15 (1&2). R. Rieber, ed. Pp. 30–44. New York: Linguistics Program, The Graduate School, CUNY.  
 2000 Stressed Stay: A New African-American English Aspect Marker. Chicago, IL: American Dialect Society.  
 2007 Bare Nouns in African American English (AAE). In *Noun Phrases in Creole Languages*. Marlyse Baptista and Jacqueline Guéron, eds. Pp. 421–434. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.  
 2009 On Shallow Grammar: African American English and the Critique of Exceptionalism. In *The Languages of Africa and the Diaspora: Educating for Language Awareness*. Jo Anne Kleifgen and George C. Bond, eds. Pp. 231–248. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Weldon, Tracey  
 1994 Variability in Negation in African American Vernacular English. *Language Variation and Change* 6:359–397.
- Wolfram, Walt  
 1969 *A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech*. Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Copyright of Transforming Anthropology is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.