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

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1 Introduction

Our paper describes results from a study of the speech of Puerto Rican children and adolescents in North Philadelphia. During a yearlong research project in the community we observed extensive use of phonological and grammatical forms considered prototypical of African American English (AAE). Previous studies have documented the use of AAE features by Puerto Ricans in communities in New York City (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968, Wolfram 1974) and Philadelphia (Poplack 1978, Labov and Harris 1986). In all cases, it was found that contact with African Americans who spoke AAE was necessary for Puerto Ricans to adopt prototypical AAE grammatical forms. AAE phonological forms were more readily apparent in the speech of Puerto Ricans in these previous studies, whether or not they were in close contact with speakers of AAE.

Wolfram (1974) distinguished between the use of AAE phonological and grammatical variables by Puerto Rican speakers in New York City. He found that even Puerto Ricans with restricted contact with African Americans used AAE phonological forms, such as monophthongization of [ay]. On the other hand, AAE grammatical forms, like habitual *be*, were categorically absent among these same speakers. It was the Puerto Ricans with extensive AAE contact who demonstrated a robust use of both phonological and grammatical variables in their speech. Wolfram concluded that, "The main differences in phonological assimilation, as indicated by the Puerto Rican groups [those with and without extensive contact with African Americans], is one of quantity, but there appears to be a qualitative difference in grammatical assimilation...Apparently, it is only through direct peer contact that extensive grammatical assimilation takes place (1974:204-5)."

Labov and Harris (1986) reported on the absence of 3rd singular -s and possessive -s among Puerto Ricans immersed in the African American community in West Philadelphia. The two Puerto Rican subjects who were considered part of that community showed the same rate of absence of these

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forms as the core group of African Americans (75%-100%). The Puerto Ricans not integrated into the community showed minimal absence of possessive and 3rd singular -s, in both cases at a rate of less than 40%. Labov and Harris conclude that it is the relative isolation of the core group of African Americans and Puerto Ricans that reinforces the use of zero possessive and 3rd singular -s as opposed to the variants typical of the white community.

Poplack (1978) studied a group of Puerto Rican children in Philadelphia enrolled in an elementary school that was 51% Puerto Rican, 46% white, and 3% African American. These children had restricted exposure to AAE, but many of the boys still showed a higher rate of monophthongization of [ay] compared to their peers. This was unexpected due to the lack of apparent contact between these children and AAE speakers. In analyzing the children's social network structure however, Poplack discovered that one African American student was named by many of the Puerto Rican students as someone they like to hang out with the most. Poplack concluded that, "the considerable use of [AAE] features by the children in this sample, and particularly the boys, can be ascribed not to the extent of their African American contacts, but rather to the notion of covert prestige (1978:101)."

As the above-mentioned studies are all over 20 years old, we were interested in considering the status of AAE phonology and morphosyntax in Puerto Rican English (PRE) in Philadelphia in the 21st century. After our initial fieldwork, it became evident that AAE forms were quite common among the Puerto Ricans, but the question emerged as to whether or not the same situation described in previous studies (Wolfram 1974, Labov and Harris 1986, Poplack 1978) continued, or whether these forms should formally be considered part of PRE. That is, are AAE forms still transferred to PRE through contact or have they become native to some PRE speakers?

In order to address this question, we present an analysis of one phonological variable, substitution of [f] for [θ][1], and one morphosyntactic variable, uninflected *be*, demonstrating that the same linguistic constraints operating in AAE for these variables are evident in PRE. We also consider the use and distribution of these forms in terms of the sociolinguistic setting in which the Puerto Rican community is situated. Additionally, we examine the use of AAE forms by the Puerto Rican children and adolescents in general in terms of the amount of exposure they have to African American people and culture.

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[1]This variation has been noted in Latino English in general, but near categorical substitution is typical of AAE and Latinos in close contact with African Americans.

2 Methodology

The community we studied is located in North Philadelphia, in the center of the area with the highest Hispanic population density in the city. The residents are predominantly Puerto Rican, and the neighborhood has a relatively small African American population.

Our initial entry into the community closely followed the guidelines suggested by Labov for neighborhood studies (1984:30-45). We selected a single city block as the focus of our research, approached residents who were open for interaction, and conducted sociolinguistic interviews with them. The location of the interviews was usually in a public space, such as the informant's front porch, a park bench, or the local church.

We also established a formal relationship with a local school (grades K-8). We went there weekly for one hour between November 2004 and March 2005 and attended a 4th grade class with 16[2] students who were below reading grade level. All but one of these students was Latino and bilingual (English/Spanish). In addition to tutoring these children in reading using the Individualized Reading Manual (Labov 2006), we conducted both group and individual interviews with the students, and carried out formal tests involving a reading passage and word lists.

In total, we interviewed 32 people from the neighborhood, ranging in age from 10 to 55 years old. The majority was Latino, though we also interviewed 5 African American subjects for comparison. Here we report on data collected from the 18 children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17. We actually had little contact with young adults (25-40 years old), and found that many older adults (over 40) had moved to Philadelphia later in life and spoke little English or only Spanish.

3 Uninflected *be*

One of the grammatical forms that serves to most clearly define AAE is uninflected *be*. The use of uninflected *be* by speakers of AAE is well documented (Green 1998, Dayton 1996, Bailey and Maynor 1987, Labov 1998, Rickford 1999). Uninflected *be* has been reported in the speech of Latinos in several communities in the United States (Fought 2003, Wolfram 1974, Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968) and its presence is generally attributed to contact with AAE.

[2]The number of students in the class was variable because attendance in the class was erratic. Also, some students were removed from the class, and some were added during the four months we visited the school.

Uninflected *be* is most commonly used to signal the habitual nature of a predicate, as in (1). The Standard English variants are shown in (2) and (3).

(1) The students ***be* talking** in Miss Smith class.
(2) The students **usually talk** in Miss Smith's class.
(3) The students **talk** in Miss Smith's class. (in general)

Because uninflected *be* usually signals the repetitive and/or ongoing nature of actions, states, and events, it is often referred to as habitual *be*. While uninflected *be* is currently strongly associated with AAE, it has been found to occur less frequently among older African American adults than among children, adolescents, and younger adults (Bailey and Maynor 1987, Cukor-Avila and Bailey 1996). At the same time, a wider range of contexts of use has been noted among adults, supporting the idea that uninflected *be* has undergone a process of grammaticalization in AAE (Bailey and Maynor 1987). These findings suggest that the current trends in use of uninflected *be* in AAE are due to recent innovations and do not necessarily have roots in the historical development of the dialect.

In order to evaluate the use of uninflected *be* in PRE compared to AAE, we referred to five properties that govern the use of uninflected *be* in AAE that were outlined by Dayton (1996):

1. *be* with habitual meaning can be explained with respect to the present tense (there is little evidence of unambiguously past tense uses of it)
2. *be* does not occur with deictic adverbs (*now*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*)
3. *be* situations are not specified, non-habitual situations
4. *be* use with future reference derives from *will be*
5. unambiguous past reference *be* derives from *would be*

We found 71 instances of uninflected *be* in the spontaneous speech of 6 Puerto Rican children and adolescents in our study.[3] From an initial evaluation of these uses of *be* we found that they were consistent with these properties. We did not find any instances of unambiguous past reference *be* or of future *be*, however. We then classified the PRE uses of uninflected *be* according to the grammatical contexts in which they occurred, as in (4)-(8). The majority of cases occurred in the context of *be + verb_ing* (with progressives). There were also instances of *be* with prepositional phrases and

[3]While we collected data from a total of 18 children and adolescents, 3 were African American and we had only brief spontaneous speech samples from the remaining 5 Puerto Rican children.

with adjectives. Other less common contexts include *be* with a past participle or with a noun phrase. The context of *be* + *verb_ing* is also a favoring environment in AAE (Labov et al 1968), particularly among younger speakers (Bailey and Maynor 1987, Wolfram 2003). Other common contexts in AAE are *be* with adverbs, prepositional phrases, and adjectives (Dayton 1996, Bailey and Maynor 1987).

(4) They ***be*** **blowing** bubbles, like, 'pop, pop.' (*be* + verb_ing)
(5) But the kids don't ***be*** **out here** in the nighttime. (*be* + adverbs and prepositional phrases)
(6) He ***be*** **bad**. (*be* + adjective)
(7) I didn't know they ***be*** **married**. (*be* + past participle; favored by pp adjectives, e.g. *tired*)
(8) There ***be*** **a lot of fights.** (*be* + noun phrase)

A comparison of the distribution of uninflected *be* in PRE with trends in use in AAE is shown in Table 1. Compared to Dayton's subjects, who were middle-aged women, it appears that our younger speakers have a more limited range of contexts of use for *be*. If we compare both groups to Bailey and Maynor's (1987) data, our younger subjects are actually comparable to theirs in favoring the *verb_ing* category. Dayton's adults also favor this than Bailey and Maynor's adults also. In both cases, the more recent data show the possible advancement of the process of grammaticalization of this variable in AAE.

Context of Use	**PRE Adolescents**	**AAE**		
		Adults		**Children**
		Dayton 1996	**Bailey & Maynor 1987**	**Bailey & Maynor 1987**
Verb -ing	71%	49%	21%	67%
Adverbs/ prepositional phrases	10%	24%	28%	15%
Adjective	9%	13%	21%	5%
Past participle	~	9%	~	~
Noun phrase	1%	5%	21%	7%
Other	7%	<1%	9%	7%

Table 1: Percentage of uninflected *be* by context for adults and adolescents

Another constraint on the use of uninflected *be* involves the semantic class of the accompanying verb (Table 2). Dayton (1996) identified six semantic environments in which uninflected *be* occurs: five semantic domains, and a default category. The semantic domains are consciousness, position, communication, existence, and possession. The default category includes manipulative verbs, activities, *get* passives, light verbs, and aspect verbs.

The most common verb type for the PRE speakers was the default category, with a majority being activities. The semantic domains of communication and position were also common. These findings differ from Dayton's in that consciousness was the most favoring domain in AAE, followed by position, communication, and the default category. However, the difference in the rates for the two groups is less important than the fact that the full range of domains evident in AAE is also found in PRE.

Semantic Class	**PRE**	**AAE**
Default	37%	17%
Communication	27%	20%
Position	18%	26%
Consciousness	10%	28%
Possession	8%	4%
Existence	2%	5%

Table 2: Distribution of uninflected *be* by semantic class

A further constraint on the use of uninflected *be* in AAE involves agency. A majority of Dayton's tokens of *be* co-occurred with intransitive verbs (over 60%). She found 60% of these intransitives to be accompanied by less agentive subjects, and 30% with the most agentive subjects. As with the AAE speakers, the majority of *be* uses by PRE speakers were intransitive (87%), and the Puerto Rican speakers also showed a preference for less agentive subjects (88%).

Based on these findings, it is evident that uninflected *be* in PRE and AAE are similar. Based on evidence from the constraints examined, the overall distribution of this form and its uses by Puerto Rican children and adolescents are consistent with the distribution and uses of this form in AAE.

4 Pronunciation of (th) as [f]

The pronunciation of (th) as [f] in AAE is well documented (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968, Rickford 1999). Latino English speakers also have this variant, but to a lesser degree than is found in AAE. When Puerto Rican speakers demonstrate a near categorical substitution of [f] for (th), it has been shown to be the result of direct contact with African Americans (Wolfram 1974). Here we examine the use of [f] for (th) among the Puerto Rican speakers in our community, considering positional constraints and style shifting.

4.1 Positional Constraints

The pronunciation of (th) is different depending on where in the word it occurs. The three possible positions are initial, as in *think* or *throw*; medial, as in *nothing* or *everything*; and final, as in *both* or *with*. Among African American speakers, Labov et al. found the following distributional pattern for [f]: it never occurred in initial position, it occurred infrequently in medial position, and it occurred variably, depending on style, in word-final position (1968:92-93).

Variant	**Initial** (n=93)		**Medial** (n=33)		**Final** (n=148)	
[θ]	25	27%	11	33%	27	18%
[f]	0	0%	2	6%	73	48%
[t]	68	72%	16	48%	3	2%
[ʔ]	0	0%	1	3%	12	8%
[Ø]	0	0%	3	9%	33	22%

Table 3: Percentages for each variant of (th) by word position for all styles

Our study replicated these general findings for positional constraints. Table 3 presents the results from the speech of 14 students in the elementary school, with data from spontaneous speech, reading passages and word lists grouped together. There are no tokens of initial [f] and only two tokens of medial [f][4], whereas 48% of the word-final instances of (th) surface as [f] (compared to 18% of the standard [θ]).

[4]Both of these tokens were the word *bathroom*, in which (th) still occurs in morpheme-final position. All of the other medial tokens were words ending in *–thing*.

The realization of (th) as [t] is common in word initial and medial position in non-standard English dialects such as PRE, Chicano English (Fought 2003), and AAE (Wolfram 1974). However, here, the rate of [t] for (th) is much higher than what has previously been found in PRE (Wolfram 1974). Fought (2003) did find categorical substitution of apico-dental stops for interdental fricative among some of her Chicano English speakers, regardless of Spanish proficiency. However, we will only focus on the [f] variant here, since that is the one that has been attributed to contact with AAE in previous studies.

4.2 Style-shifting

The data in this section are taken from a controlled experiment using a reading passage and a word list. The reading passage contained six instances of word-final (th): *both* (3x) and *math* (3x), and the word list contained three: *both*, *math*, and *tooth*. Eleven elementary school children were asked to read the materials. We recorded them and analyzed their production for evidence of style-shifting.

The results reveal a striking division between two groups of students. Eight of the children used the non-standard variant [f] nearly categorically in all styles. We refer to these speakers as the Categorical [f] Users (Willie, Teri, Natalie, Ken, Jorge, Neli, and Joe). The remaining three students are more sensitive to style-shifting constraints, using the standard variant [θ] in the word list, both [θ] and [f] in the reading passage, and only [f] in spontaneous speech. These speakers are referred to as the Style-Shifters (Alex, Crisi, Jonah, and Tess).

Table 4 presents the results for the two parts of the experiment for the two different groups. The differences between how the two groups use [θ] and [f] are significant for the Reading Passage ($p \leq 0.001$) and the Word List ($p \leq 0.001$).

Variant	**Reading Passage**		**Word List**	
	Style-Shifters (n=21)	**Categorical [f] Users** (n=39)	**Style-Shifters** (n=12)	**Categorical [f] Users** (n=21)
[θ]	11	1	11	0
[f]	5	32	1	20
[ʔ]	2	0	0	0
[Ø]	3	6	0	1

Table 4: Variable pronunciation of (th) by group and style

Figure 1 compares the percentage of tokens with the standard form [θ] with all of the non-standard forms in both groups (as can be seen in Table 4, most of the non-standard forms were [f], while a few were [ʔ] or [Ø]). Style-Shifters clearly increase their use of the standard form when they are focusing more on their speech and Categorical [f] Users almost never use the standard form in either style.

Word-final (th) is infrequent in spontaneous speech, apart from the word *with*, which has been shown to have a unique behavior (Wolfram 1974:97-104) so data from spontaneous speech are not included in this analysis. However, only 4 out of the 28 tokens of (th) that do occur in spontaneous speech contain [θ]. This suggests that the Style Shifters would likely use less [θ] in speech than they did in the reading passage and that the rate of usage for the Categorical [f] Users would not change.

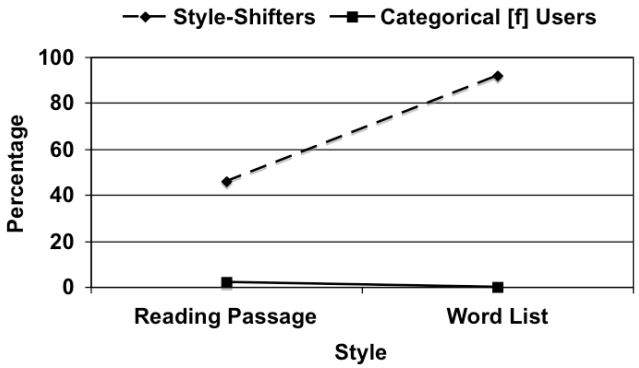

Figure 1: Percentage of tokens with standard [θ] by style

On the surface, the pattern shown in Figure 1 appears similar to Wolfram's finding that Puerto Ricans with extensive African American contacts show near categorical (87%) substitution of [f] for morpheme-final (th), whereas Puerto Ricans with restricted African American contacts show a much more variable (55%) substitution (Wolfram 1974:202). However, in our study there is no discernible relationship between level of use of [f] and the amount of contact with African Americans: two out of seven of the Categorical [f] Users reports having African American friends, compared to two out of the four Style-Shifters. Thus, this distribution most likely represents a development internal to PRE based on the pattern that was originally due to contact with AAE speakers. The evaluation of (th) as a sociolinguistic variable, as evidenced by the use of the Style-Shifters, also may represent a PRE-internal development. Further study of the Puerto

Rican community will be necessary to determine what social factors differentiate the Categorical [f] Users and the Style-Shifters, since these different patterns cannot be attributed to the level of contact with African Americans, as was done in previous studies.

5 The Sociolinguistic Setting

Following from the evidence of the systematic use of uninflected *be* and word-final [f] for (th) among some Puerto Rican subjects, we are faced with the need to explain the presence of these forms in their speech. Traditionally, this phenomenon would be accounted for in terms of contact (Wolfram 1974, Poplack 1978, Labov and Harris 1986), and so we investigated the quantity and quality of contact between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in this neighborhood.

According to the most recent census data (US Census 2000), the neighborhood we studied is 66% to 88.5% Puerto Rican and between 12% and 30% African American. In the course of conducting our fieldwork, we only noted a few African American families living among the majority of Puerto Ricans. When asked about the type of people that lived in their neighborhood, all of our informants indicated that it was mostly "a Puerto Rican neighborhood". The main elementary school in the area is 87% Hispanic and 11% African American. The local high school is not that much more integrated, with a distribution of 76% Hispanic and 20% African American. All of the children we interviewed either attended the elementary school or the high school. The density of the Hispanic population in this area is underscored by the fact that Philadelphia is only 8% Hispanic (a majority of Puerto Ricans) and 43% African American.

5.1 Survey of AAE Contact

We administered two surveys to 11 of the elementary school children in order to obtain more detailed information about possible contact with AAE. As shown in Table 5, the majority of the children does not have African American friends, but live "near" African Americans. Some of their parents have African American friends, and all of them attend church with African Americans. None of the children have an African American best friend, few of them watch television targeted to African Americans, but a majority indicated that their favorite music was from rap or R&B artists.

In order to better assess what these findings mean in terms of contact, the responses to questions 1 and 6 were combined to assess direct contact. Questions 2, 3 and 4 were taken to indicate casual contact, and 5 and 7 were

combined for a measure of contact through the media. Table 6 shows that a minority of the children has direct contact with African Americans, and even fewer have exposure to African American culture through the media. A majority does have casual contact, mostly through church and the neighborhood.[5] In terms of transfer of forms, this contact profile would possibly support the transfer of phonological variables, but probably not grammatical ones (Wolfram 1974).

#	Question	Yes	No
1	Do you have African American friends?	40%	60%
2	Do you live near African Americans?	78%	22%
3	Do your parents have African American friends?	44%	56%
4	Do African Americans attend your church?	100%	0%
5	Do you watch "The Parkers" or other shows like it on UPN or BET?	30%	70%
6	Do you have an African American best friend?	0%	100%
7	Is your favorite musician a rap or R&B artist?	63%	37%

Table 5: Survey results on African American and Puerto Rican contact (n=11)

Level of Contact	Yes	No
Direct contact (1,6)	40%	60%
Casual contact (2,3,4)	63%	37%
Contact through media (5,7)	38%	62%

Table 6: Levels of contact with African American culture

[5]Unfortunately, we do not know how the children defined “near” in question 1, though evidence from the sociolinguistic interviews show that they do not live on the same block as African Americans for the most part.

5.2 Extent of AAE Use in Community

We can better evaluate the situation by looking at the overall frequency of AAE forms in the speech of 15 of our subjects.[6] Figure 2 is an implicational scale showing the speakers' use of six forms generally associated with AAE. The forms included are preterite *had*, uninflected *be*, zero copula, zero 3rd singular -s, r-vocalization, and (th) > [f]. Though not reported here, we also found all of the subjects to substitute [d] for (dh).

Subject	Age	Group	*Had* preterite	Uninflected *be*	Ø copula	Ø 3rd sing –s	*r* vocalization	th>f
Sol	17	PR	+	+	+	+	+	+
Becky	17	PR	+	+	+	+	+	+
Draymont	15	AA	-	+	+	+	+	+
Alex	11	PR	-	+	+	+	+	+
Willie	11	PR	-	+	+	+	+	+
Mary	15	AA	-	+	+	+	+	-
Joe	12	PR	-	+	+	+	-	+
Gustavo	15	PR	-	+	+	-	+	+
Pepe	11	PR	-	-	-	+	+	+
Teri	11	PR	-	-	-	+	+	+
Natalie	11	PR	-	-	-	-	+	+
Quincy	11	AA	-	-	-	-	+	+
Ken	11	PR	-	-	-	-	-	+

Figure 2: Implicational scale for the use of AAE features among Puerto Rican and African American children and adolescents

The Puerto Rican speakers with the greatest range of AAE forms are Sol and Becky, who grew-up in the neighborhood and attended the local high school. Both girls indicated in their interviews that they thought the neighborhood was mostly a Puerto Rican neighborhood and that there were very few African Americans living there. Both of them also have parents who grew up in the neighborhood. Two of the Puerto Rican elementary school children, Alex and Willie, demonstrate the full range of forms except for preterite *had*, however they reported that they did not have African American friends. Willie does indicate that he lives near African Americans. Joe and Gustavo also use a number of AAE forms. Joe claims to have no African American friends, does not live near African Americans nor do his parents have African American friends. Gustavo grew up in the neighborhood and attended the local high school. Pepe, Ken, and Natalie,

[6]We were not able to analyze all of the subjects for the implicational scale because of variability in the quantity and quality of their spontaneous speech samples.

who only use AAE phonological variables, did not report having African American friends. Teri, with zero 3rd singular -s, r-vocalization, and th>f, did report having African American friends.

The African American speakers in the study (Draymont, Mary and Quincy) are variable in their use of these forms also, so much so that the speakers with the greatest range of AAE forms are Puerto Rican. Overall, while the teenagers reported contact with African Americans in their interviews, the elementary school children reported little to no direct contact with AAE speakers. At the same time, the one African American child in class with the Puerto Rican children, Quincy, did not demonstrate speech typical of AAE, and actually only used phonological forms associated with AAE, not any grammatical ones.

6 Conclusions

From previous studies of Puerto Rican and African American varieties of English, Puerto Ricans with the most contact with African American culture assimilate both phonological and grammatical forms from AAE. Those with limited contact acquire only phonological forms, if any. As would be expected from the social situation under consideration here, AAE phonological forms might be common among the Puerto Rican speakers in the community, and they are, but transfer of the constraints governing these forms would be less likely. In showing that some of the children style-shift in their use of [f] for (th), we have shown that the use of these variables in governed by sociolinguistic constraints internal to PRE. At the same time, the use of uninflected be is quite generalized among the Puerto Rican children and adolescents and patterns in the same way as in AAE.

Because the majority of children report not having African American friends, their extensive use of AAE phonological forms and systematic use of AAE grammatical forms would be unexpected. However, they do demonstrate usage patterns for the forms analyzed that are more consistent with Latino speakers in close contact with African Americans. We conclude that they are acquiring these forms from older siblings and adults within the Puerto Rican community and that the variants associated with AAE are becoming the norm in the vernacular for this speech community. Wolfram speculated that Puerto Ricans with limited black contact, “may be assimilating phonological features of black English from Puerto Ricans with more extensive black contacts than themselves (1974:200).” Some 30 years later, this is likely the case with grammatical variants also. The factors motivating this shift remain to be examined in more detail, though they are likely associated with increased prestige being assigned to AAE in the inner

city, or the fact that Puerto Rican children are so accustomed to hearing AAE that they no longer differentiate it from their own speech.

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