

Reconstructing the History of AAVE: New Data on an Old Theme

Author(s): Walt Wolfram

Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on Aspect (2000), pp. 333-347

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The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

Reconstructing the History of AAVE: New Data on an Old Theme

WALT WOLFRAM

North Carolina State University

0. Introduction*

Despite intense scrutiny over the past several decades, the history of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) remains cloaked in controversy. Opinion on the genesis and earlier development of AAVE has now endured several “consensus” positions, only to return to a state of dispute. In the 1950s and early 1960s the Anglicist hypothesis—that the speech of African Americans derived directly from British-based dialects—was commonly accepted by dialectologists (McDavid and McDavid 1951), but it was replaced in the 1970s by the widespread acceptance of the creolist hypothesis, which posited AAVE to be rooted historically in an expansive creole found in the African diaspora (Bailey 1965, Stewart 1967, Dillard 1972). However, since that period, new corpora have emerged to challenge the creolist hypothesis, providing a basis for the resurgence of a modified version of the Anglicist position (Montgomery, Fuller, and DeMarse 1993, Mufwene 1996, Poplack 1999). But the neo-Anglicist position has hardly become a consensus one, as disputes remain over the nature of written and spoken data (e.g. Hannah 1997, Sutcliffe forthcoming, Wolfram 2000), the language contact situation involving earlier African Americans (Winford 1997, 1998, forthcoming), and the sociohistorical circumstances contextualizing earlier AAVE (Mufwene 1996, Rickford 1997, Singler 1998a,b). If nothing else, the shifting positions on its origin and development should caution us to go slow in arriving at definitive conclusions about the earlier status of AAVE.

One of the most important types of evidence for the neo-Anglicist position comes from data collected in transplant enclave communities, that is, groups of African Americans who left the United States before the Civil War and subsequently lived in relative isolation in locations such as Samaná in the Dominican Republic (Poplack & Sankoff 1987, Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989,

* Research reported here was funded by National Science Foundation Grant BCS 99-10224 and the William C. Friday Endowment at North Carolina State University. I am indebted to Becky Childs and Elaine Green for extracting data for several of the variables discussed here as well as for their tireless fieldwork. I am also grateful to Erik Thomas, who conducted the acoustic analyses of vowels reported here.

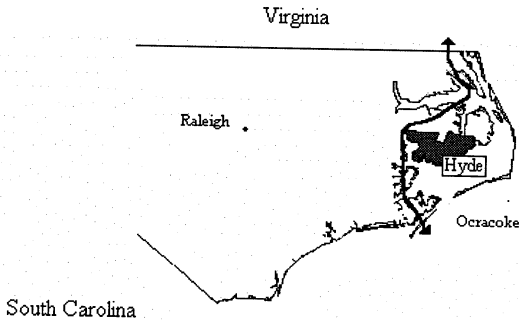
Poplack 1999) and Nova Scotia in Canada (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991, Poplack 1999). This study considers a different but equally important enclave community, the case of a small, long-standing community of African Americans and Anglo Americans who have lived together in relative isolation within the United States for almost three centuries. Although expatriate enclave communities might, at first glance, seem to hold more potential for examining the state of earlier AAVE than the community we examine here, some isolated situations in the United States should offer equally revealing insight. There is comparable social and physical insularity though the geographic dislocation may not be as great as that of expatriate transplant communities. Furthermore, in the case examined here, the historical continuity and time depth are actually greater than that found in some transplant situations. This unique situation therefore offers a critical perspective on the development and maintenance of ethnolinguistic distinctiveness in earlier of AAVE.

1. The Unique Status of Hyde County, North Carolina

The bi-racial community of Hyde County, North Carolina, located along the eastern seaboard of North Carolina by the Pamlico Sound, was first inhabited by Europeans in the first decade of the 1700s, making it one of the oldest Anglo American settlement communities in North Carolina. Shortly thereafter, African Americans were brought to the area (Kay & Cary 1995). Although the region once thrived as a major inlet for ships sailing the Atlantic Ocean, the inlet fell into relative disuse in the mid-1800s, leaving the area isolated. In fact, the first official census conducted in 1790 (4,120) and the most recent census figures in 1990 (5,411) show that Hyde County has gained less than 1,500 people over two centuries.

This remote coastal setting, which has maintained an African American population of between a quarter and a third of the overall population of Hyde County for almost three centuries, provides an ideal context for examining several critical issues regarding the historical development of African American speech. It offers a sociolinguistic context involving a long-term, relatively insular bi-racial situation featuring a distinctive Anglo American variety; the Outer Banks dialect described in a number of recent publications (e.g. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995, 1997, Wolfram, Hazen, & Schilling-Estes 1999) is found in this coastal mainland region as well as on the Outer Banks. Figure 1 indicates the location of Hyde County and delineates the approximate isogloss for the traditional Outer Banks dialect. The historical continuity of the African American community in the region further provides an important perspective on the possible genesis and early development of AAVE. It offers additional insight into how African American speech developed with respect to local Anglo American vernacular varieties of English.

Figure 1. Hyde County and the Boundaries of the Outer Banks Dialect



Our data (Green 1998, Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000, Childs 2000) suggest that some earlier dialect features of the English spoken by African Americans were congruent with the distinctive regional varieties of English spoken by their Anglo American cohorts. But there is also evidence for some long-standing, selective structural differences in Anglo American and African American varieties, even in small, bi-racial enclave communities. Finally, there is evidence for the more recent development of a supra-regional variety of AAVE that is being adopted by younger African Americans.

2. A Comparative Profile of Hyde County African American Speech

Since 1997, the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project has interviewed over a hundred long-term residents of Hyde County, 65 African Americans and 43 Anglo Americans. The age range of the speakers spans a century in apparent time, from those born as early as the 1890s to those born in the 1990s. Subjects were chosen following the social network procedure of locating a friend of a friend (Milroy 1987) and a family-tree social network method in which different members of extended families were interviewed (Green 1998). Our analysis is based on a subset of data from the conversational interviews conducted with participants, typically 32 African Americans divided into four generational groups (those born between 1898-1920, 1924-1949, 1953-1963, and 1971-1983) and a baseline group of 8 Anglo Americans (For more extensive analysis of the speech of Anglo Americans of the region, see Wolfram, et al. 1999). A representative set of diagnostic variables has now been studied in some detail; these include the vowel system (Thomas forthcoming, Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000), phonotactic patterns such as syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction (Childs 2000), copula absence (Green 1998), past tense *be* leveling (Green 1998), and *-s* verbal marking (Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000). A qualitative overview of the results is given in table 1. The table compares older and younger Hyde County African Americans and Anglo Americans, as well as

contemporary AAVE as described in regions other than Hyde County (e.g. Fasold & Wolfram 1970, Labov 1972, Fasold 1972, Baugh 1983, and Rickford 1999). In table 1, distinctive patterns among the groups are indicated by shading. The co-existence of patterns is indicated by +/- or -/+, with the dominant variant indicated first.

Table 1. Summary of Vernacular Dialect Alignment

DIALECT FEATURE	ELDERLY HYDE ANGLO AMER.	ELDERLY HYDE AFRICAN AMER.	YOUNG HYDE ANGLO AMER.	YOUNG HYDE AFRICAN AMER.	URBAN AAVE
PHONOLOGY					
Prevocalic CCR in <i>bes'</i> <i>egg</i>	-	+	-	+	+
Postvocalic <i>-r</i> in <i>year</i>	+	+	+	-	-
Backed /ay/ in <i>time</i>	+	+	+/-	-	-
Unglided /ay/ in <i>time</i>	-	-	+/-	-/+	+
Front-gliding /aw/ in <i>town</i>	+	+	-	-/+	-
Lowered /er/ in <i>bear</i>	+	+	-	-	-
Raised, unglided /ɔ/ in <i>caught</i>	+	+	-/+	-/+	-
Fronted /o/ in <i>coat</i>	+	+	+	+	-
MORPHOSYNTAX					
NP 3 rd pl. Subj. Verbal <i>-s</i>	+	+	+/-	-	-
Pro 3 rd pl. Subj. Verbal <i>-s</i>	-	+	-	-	-
3 rd sg. <i>-s</i> Absence	-	+	-	+	+
Habitual <i>be</i> verb <i>-ing</i>	-	-	-	+	+
Copula Abs.	-	+	-	+	+
<i>Was</i> Regularization	+	+	+	+	+
<i>Weren't</i> Regularization	+	+	+/-	-	-

As shown in table 1, some earlier dialect features of the English spoken by Hyde County African Americans paralleled the distinctive regional features used by their Anglo American cohorts, but there is also evidence for long-standing, selective structural differences in the Anglo American and African American varieties of Hyde County. For example, the data for the elderly speakers (born between 1898 and 1920), which would be most reflective of the earlier speech of the County given the apparent time construct (Bailey, Wikle, Tillery, & Sand 1991), shows that African Americans and Anglo Americans shared the same distinctive Outer Banks vowel system (Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000,

Thomas forthcoming). At the same time, the process of syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction apparently operated differently for the two groups of speakers in the past. In a similar way, earlier African Americans used the distinctive Outer Banks dialect pattern of past *be* leveling in which positive constructions level to *was* (e.g. *I/you/(s)he/we/y'all/they was there*) whereas negative constructions level to *weren't* (e.g. *I/you/(s)he/we/y'all/they weren't there*). The data indicate further that the adoption of regional structures was not always isomorphic, so that the African American version of verbal *-s* marking with 3rd pl. subjects is more general than that found among their Anglo American cohorts. The Anglo American version of this concord rule limits it to noun phrase subjects (e.g. *The ducks likes food*) whereas the African American version generalizes the application to both noun phrase and pronoun subjects (e.g. *They ducks likes food* and *The ducks likes food*). And, of course, there are innovative features of supra-regional AAVE that have been adopted by younger African Americans, such as habitual *be* with verb *-ing*.

One of the important lessons to be taken from this examination concerns the selection of structures for investigating earlier African American speech. An authentic picture of earlier African American speech can emerge only if a wide array of dialect structures is considered, including overall profiles of vowel systems and profiles of complete tense, aspect, and modal systems. Selective, single-structure studies may reveal significant insight into a particular linguistic process and/or on a particular dimension of an ethnolinguistic boundary, but such studies may obscure or even distort our understanding of the overall relationship of African American speech to other varieties.

Finally, the comparison of older and younger African American speakers in Hyde County with some of the core structures of contemporary AAVE spoken elsewhere indicates change toward a supra-regional norm. Evidence from the ongoing change in Hyde County supports the contention that African American speakers are diverging from their Anglo American vernacular cohorts as local dialect features are being replaced by a more widespread, common-core set of AAVE features.

3. Patterns of Accommodation and Distinctiveness

In this section, we illustrate specific patterns of historical dialect congruence and distinctiveness for African American and Anglo American speakers in Hyde County by examining two phonological features and two morphosyntactic features. These diagnostic structures demonstrate the pattern of earlier dialect congruence and distinctiveness and show how the respective patterns are currently undergoing change.

3.1 /ai/ Backing: A Case of Historical Convergence

One of the dialect icons of the Outer Banks dialect is the backing and raising of the nucleus of the vowel /ai/ in words like *time* or *tide*, so that it is produced

phonetically as [ɔɪ] or [ʌ̃ɪ]. This distinctive vowel production has now been amply documented for the Anglo American community by Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1995), Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999), and Wolfram, et al (1999). To examine whether or not African Americans participated in this dialect pattern, we extracted both impressionistic and acoustic data on /ai/ (See Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000 for the acoustic analysis) for a subset of speakers representing the four generational groups of African Americans and a baseline subset of elderly Anglo Americans in Hyde County. For each speaker, we impressionistically extracted up to 100 tokens of /ai/ and coded each one in terms of three categories: (1) the backed raised variant [ʌ̃ɪ] typical of the regional Outer Banks dialect; (2) the unglided variant [a] typical of contemporary AAVE as well as many Southern mainland varieties of English, and (3) the non-backed, glided variant [aɪ] typical of most Northern varieties of English. The data were then subjected to multivariate statistical analysis using VARBRUL. VARBRUL is a probabilistic-based multivariate procedure that shows the relative contributions of different factors to the overall variability of fluctuating forms. Factor groups may consist of independent linguistic constraints, such as following phonological environment, or external social variables, such as age group or social affiliation. The weighting values range from 0 to 1; in a binomial application, a value of greater than .5 indicates that the factor in question has a favoring effect on the occurrence of the variant, while a value of less than .5 indicates a disfavoring effect. Two binomial analyses were conducted, one in which the regional, backed-raised variant was treated as the “application variant” and the other variants as the non-application, and one in which the glide-reduced variant was considered the application variant and the other variants as the non-application. The results of the two analyses are given in table 2.

The VARBRUL analysis, as well as the acoustic analysis found in Wolfram, Thomas, & Green (2000), indicates that elderly African Americans in Hyde County clearly accommodated to the traditional backed and raised Outer Banks production of the /ai/ vowel, whereas younger speakers have moved away from that norm and now embrace the widespread AAVE unglided variant. This evidence, along with evidence from the overall vowel system analysis given in Wolfram, Thomas, & Green (2000), clearly demonstrates that African Americans and Anglo Americans in Hyde County once shared a common vowel system.

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Table 2. Comparison of /ai/ Backing-Raising and Ungliding: VARBRUL Results

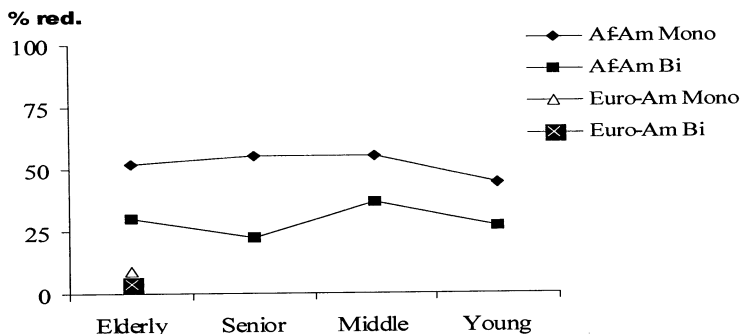
Backing/Raising (application)		Ungliding of /ai/ (application)	
Input Probability	= .20	Input Probability	= .10
Age:		Age:	
Elderly Anglo American	= .58	Elderly Anglo American	= .47
Elderly African American	= .62	Elderly African American	= .34
Senior African American	= .53	Senior African American	= .33
Middle African American	= .60	Middle African American	= .60
Young African American	= .19	Young African American	= .78
Following Phonological Env.		Following Phonological Env.	
___ Nasal	= .53	___ Nasal	= .74
___ Vd Obst.	= .57	___ Vd Obst.	= .45
___ Vl. Obst.	= .41	___ Vl Obst	= .32
Chi Square per Cell	= 1.522	Chi Square per Cell	= .437

3.2. Consonant Cluster Reduction: A Case of Historical Divergence

The deletion of the final stop in syllable-coda clusters (e.g. *tes* 'test', *col* 'cold', *ac* 'act') is a highly diagnostic feature in American English dialects (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998). It is also a process heavily influenced by various independent linguistic constraints, such as phonological environment and the morphemic status of the cluster. Whereas all speakers of English have some cluster reduction in preconsonantal contexts (e.g. *tes* 'case'), extensive cluster reduction in prevocalic contexts (e.g. *tes* 'on) is often indicative of phonological transfer (Wolfram, Childs, & Torberg 2000) from a language not having syllable-coda clusters. Childs (2000) provides an extensive analysis of cluster reduction for 40 speakers from Hyde County, 32 African Americans evenly distributed in four age categories and a baseline group of 8 Anglo-American speakers. Figure 2 summarizes the incidence of prevocalic consonant cluster reduction for monomorphemic (e.g. *guest*, *mist*) and bimorphemic (*guessed*, *missed*) clusters, along with the figures of the VARBRUL analysis as reported in Childs (2000).

The analysis clearly indicates that prevocalic cluster reduction has been, and continues to be, markedly different for the African American and Anglo American speech communities in Hyde County, despite the apparent congruence of other aspects of their phonological systems. It is particularly noteworthy that this phonotactic pattern has shown persistent ethnolinguistic distinctiveness while many paradigmatic dimensions of phonology, such as their vowel systems, have been shared by both groups of speakers. The data suggest further that extensive prevocalic consonant cluster reduction among African Americans may be indicative of a long-term substratal effect from the original language contact situation involving English and West African languages devoid of syllable-coda clusters (Welmers 1973). Clearly, prevocalic cluster reduction in Hyde County indicates selective and persistent ethnolinguistic distinctiveness.

Figure 2. Prevocalic Syllable-Coda Cluster Reduction in Hyde County Speech



VARBRUL Analysis:

Input probability = .58

Age/Ethnicity: elderly Af. Am. = .62; senior Af.Am. = .57; middle Af. Am. = .69;
 young Af. Am. = .60; elderly Euro. Am. = .15

Cluster Status: monomorphemic = .55; bimorphemic = .40

Following Environment: prevocalic = .24; pause = .59; preconsonantal = .69

Chi square per cell = .993

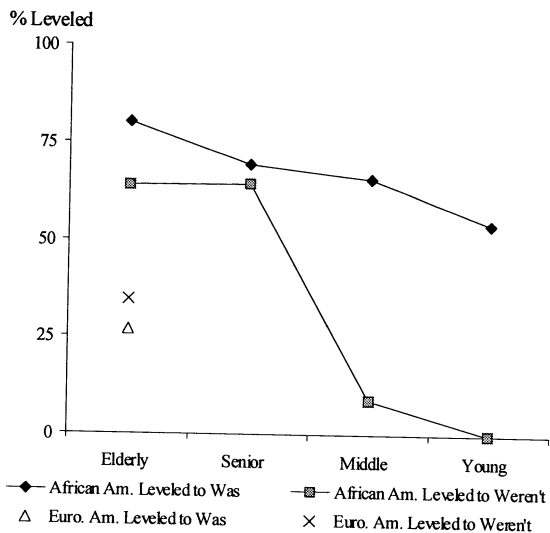
3.3. Leveling to *Weren't*: A Case of Morphosyntactic Convergence

Studies of Outer Banks English (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994; Wolfram et al. 1999) have shown a distinctive, remorphologized pattern of past tense *be* regularization in which leveling to *was* takes place in positive constructions (e.g. *The dogs was down there* or *We was down there*) and leveling to *weren't* takes place in negative constructions (e.g. *I weren't there*; *It weren't nice*). Whereas leveling to *was* is quite common in English vernaculars around the world (Chambers 1995:243), Hyde County English participates in the much more restricted, remorphologized version of *weren't* leveling among English dialects (Trudgill 1990, Cheshire 1982). The typical pattern of past tense *be* leveling for AAVE regularizes *was* in both positive and negative constructions (Weldon 1994), thus aligning it with the more widespread pattern among English dialects. Figure 3 indicates the incidence of leveling to *was* and leveling to *weren't* for the four generations of African Americans and the baseline older Anglo Americans in Hyde County. The accompanying VARBRUL analysis considers the effect of subject type on *was* and *weren't* leveling for the African-American speakers, since previous studies have shown both *was* and *weren't* leveling to be sensitive to a type of subject constraint (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994, Hazen 1996, Tagliamonte & Smith 1999). For example, leveling to *was* is favored when the subject is a noun phrase vs. a pronoun (e.g. *The dogs was* > *They was*), and strongly favored with existential subjects (e.g. *There was dogs at home*). Studies of variable constraints on leveling to *weren't* show more varied patterning, as

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some dialects (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994) show a favoring effect for existentials (e.g. *There weren't a dog*) and other varieties indicate a favoring effect with first person subjects (e.g. *I weren't there*).

Figure 4. Past Tense be Leveling



VARBRUL Analysis:

Leveled to *was*:

Input Probability	= .77
3rd NP	= .68
Existential	= .63
2nd Sing./pl. PN	= .58
3rd pl. PN	= .38
1st pl.	= .33

Leveled to *weren't*:

Input Probability	= .66
Existential	= .81
1st Sing.	= .51
3rd NP	= .44
3rd Pro	= .42

The figures for *was* and *weren't* leveling show that elderly African Americans in Hyde County align with the pattern characteristic of the local Anglo American community, whereas younger African Americans have abandoned this pattern in favor of a more generalized version of leveling to *was* unconstrained by polarity—the more common AAVE pattern. The results for elderly African Americans indicate high levels of leveling to *was* and to *weren't*, thereby indicating a fairly remorphologized version of the rule on the basis of polarity. Younger African Americans retain *was* leveling but relinquish *weren't* leveling. The slight decline of leveling to *was* among younger African Americans may be attributed to the effects of more extensive exposure to mainstream standard dialects, whereas the recession of leveling to *weren't* among younger African

Americans is a significant departure from the traditional, localized vernacular norm.

The VARBRUL analysis indicates constraints that are similar to those found in other studies of *was* and *weren't* leveling. *Was* is favored with NP plural subjects over pronouns (Hazen 1996; Tagliamonte & Smith 1999) and *weren't* is favored for existentials, just as it is on the Outer Banks (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994). The comparison of *weren't* and *was* regularization clearly shows that elderly African American speakers aligned with their local Anglo American cohorts, but that this pattern has been abandoned in favor of the more common AAVE pattern among younger African Americans in Hyde County.

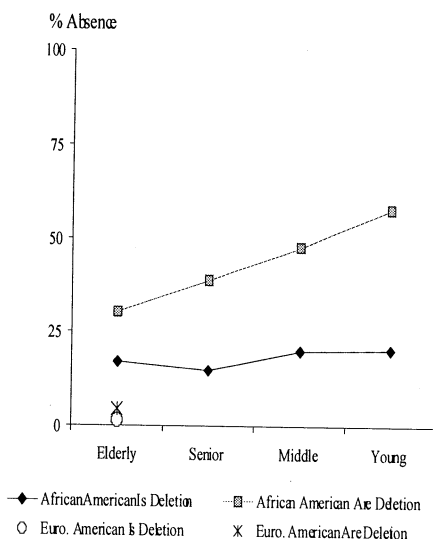
3.4. Copula Absence: A Case of Persistent Divergence

The absence of copula and auxiliary for contractible forms of *is* and *are* (e.g. *She nice* 'She's nice', *They acting silly* 'They're acting silly') has been one of the most highlighted structures of AAVE (e.g. Labov 1969, Wolfram 1969, Baugh 1983, Winford 1997, 1998, Rickford 1997, 1998). Although restricted copula absence has sometimes been found in white Southern rural varieties, its use in these varieties has been attributed to assimilation from African American speech rather than to donor dialects in the British Isles (Wolfram 1974). In figure 5, the incidence for the overall deletion of *is* and *are* is summarized for the elderly Anglo American baseline group and for the four different generations of African Americans, along with a VARBRUL analysis for independent linguistic effects for African American speakers. Following the tradition of other studies (e.g. Labov 1969, Wolfram 1969, Baugh 1983, Rickford 1998), we consider constraint effects based on copula form (*is* vs. *are*), subject type (NP vs. pronoun) and predicate complement type (predicate nominative as in *She the woman*, predicate adjective as in *She nice*, predicate locative as in *She in the house*, verb – *ing* as in *She running*, and *gonna* as in *She gonna go*).

It is quite clear that copula absence is a distinctly African American trait in Hyde County. Although some rural white Southern American vernacular varieties share copula absence to a limited degree (Wolfram 1974, Bailey & Maynor 1985), Outer Banks English is not one of them (Wolfram, Hazen, & Tamburro 1997). Thus, we see a significant discontinuity in both earlier and current versions of African American and Anglo American speech in Hyde County with respect to copula absence. At the same time, the variable constraints on copula absence for AAVE in Hyde County indicated in the VARBRUL analysis parallel quite closely those found in other studies (Labov 1969, Rickford 1998): *are* favors absence over *is*, preceding pronouns favor absence over NPs, and the complements *gonna* and verb *-ing* favor absence over predicate nominatives and predicate adjectives. In Hyde County, copula absence has been, and continues to be, a distinguishing trait of AAVE that is not shared by the local Anglo-American variety.

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Figure 5. Incidence of Copula/Auxiliary *are* and *is* Absence



VARBRUL RESULTS:

Input probability	= .28	
<i>is/are:</i>	<i>is</i> = .44;	<i>are</i> = .69
Subject:	NP = .43;	pro = .56
Pred. Comp.:	nom = .34; adj = .54;	loc = .45; V-ing = .65; <i>gonna</i> = .76
Chi square per cell	= 1.285	

4. Conclusion

Our consideration of a unique, long-standing bi-racial dialect enclave reveals important insight into the state of earlier AAVE as well as its development in the twentieth century. One important finding is the apparent accommodation of earlier African Americans to some of the local regional dialect norms of their Anglo American cohorts. This accommodation is particularly evident in the paradigmatic parameters of phonology such as the vowel system, but also found in some of the morphosyntactic traits as well. For example, it is obvious that past tense leveling of *be* in earlier Hyde County AAVE accommodated to the local norm, along with some other dimensions of verbal concord (Wolfram, Thomas, & Green 2000).

At the same time, the data indicate that a core set of distinctive vernacular dialect structures developed within earlier AAVE. Given the time-depth of the community and the accommodation of African Americans to many local dialect features, it is most reasonable to attribute these distinctive entholinguistic traits to the long-term effects of the earlier contact situation between Africans and Anglo

Americans. There is no basis for attributing structural traits such as copula absence and prevocalic cluster reduction to the founder English dialects from the British Isles since they apparently did not exist there and do not exist in the cohort Anglo American dialects of Hyde County. Furthermore, it is unlikely that they would be recent innovations since these features co-existed with the traditional local dialect traits for extended periods of time. While the extent of the Outer Banks regional dialect influence on the historic Hyde County African American community is impressive, the persistence of selective features that may have marked ethnicity for several centuries in the remote environs of Hyde County is even more noteworthy. Evidence for a long-term substratal effect against a background of accommodation to local norms is certainly one of the most remarkable aspects of earlier AAVE in this context.

Finally, the current direction of change among Hyde County African Americans should be noted. Although there are still vestiges of the localized dialect evident in the speech of some younger African Americans, particularly with respect to phonology, the recession of the traditional Outer Banks dialect has been rather dramatic. The pattern of dialect recession for the traditional dialect is not unlike the decline found in the speech of Outer Banks Anglo Americans (Wolfram, et al. 1999), but the replacive norms are quite different. African Americans are clearly supplanting the vernacular Outer Banks English with core AAVE features, quite unlike their Anglo Americans cohorts. In an important sense, then, the ethnolinguistic divide between the groups is growing, not only because AAVE continues to develop on an independent course of change (Dayton 1996), but because African Americans have also been losing some of the distinctive regional dimensions that they once shared with their cohort Anglo Americans. Durable enclave situations such as Hyde County have much to teach us about the development of earlier African American speech and its current trajectory of change. The development of AAVE is certainly complex and diverse, but such unique situations help clarify the role of accommodation to local norms and reveal a persistent pattern of selective ethnolinguistic distinctiveness in the past and present development of AAVE.

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Box 8105 English Department
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-8105

wolfram@social.chass.ncsu.edu