

Intonation Variation Over Time in the American South

African American English (AAE) and Southern European American English (EAE) have shared similar geographic and linguistic histories, though the degree of shared linguistic systems is still up for debate (Fasold et al. 1987; Labov 1998). Prior work on intonational variation of these two varieties, though sparse, has demonstrated that AAE shows a higher density of dramatic rises and falls of the pitch contour and a wider pitch range than in EAE, which are seemingly unique to AAE (Tarone 1973; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Cole et al. 2005; McLarty and Thomas 2010; McLarty 2011, 2013). As of yet, little work has examined how intonation in these varieties has changed over time.

This study analyzes intonational patterns of 12 natives of Raleigh, NC, balanced across sex and ethnicity from sociolinguistic interviews conducted in 2009 (Dodsworth and Kohn 2012). This analysis is supplemented with 12 archival recordings of ex-slave and white Confederate era speakers, also balanced across sex and ethnicity (Library of Congress American Memory; Joseph Hall Tapes) to understand how prosodic patterns may have changed over time. Using the ToBI transcription system, prosody is analyzed at the level of intermediate phrase boundaries (L- and H-) for type and relative frequency of these two edge tones, as well as the type and relative frequency of pitch accents (H* and L+H*) in conversational speech, allowing for the quantification of differences in intonation between AAE and EAE speaker groups (Beckman et al. 2005).

Results indicate that while AAE speakers remain relatively stable over time in their use of intermediate phrase boundaries and pitch accents, it appears that modern EAE speakers are becoming more like their modern AAE counterparts, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between these contact varieties.

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