

Twentieth Century Sound Change in Washington DC African American English
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African American English (AAE) is the most extensively researched and discussed dialect of American English. AAE, like other minority ethnic dialects, is often compared to the local benchmark European American English (EAE) varieties. Nonetheless, there remain important questions about AAE and in particular sound change within AAE speaking communities. In a recent review of work on language and ethnicity, Fought (2013) lamented the fact that almost no studies have investigated change over time within communities of speakers. In the present study, I examine vowel differences, which are perceptually salient for judgments about speakers (Purnell et al. 1999). I pay special attention to Thomas's (2007) African American Vowel Shift configuration (AAVS), which has been identified in a number of regions across the country and affects different vowel classes. The data come from a unique corpus of African Americans in Washington, D.C., comprised of both legacy data, recorded in 1968, as well as modern data recorded in 2015. I explore the full vowel systems of 20 speakers born between 1890 and 2002.

Over 4000 vowels were extracted for analysis. Phonetic correlates of pronunciation, notably the first and second formants, were used to quantify variation. Results indicate some change over time, including the retraction of the high back vowels, suggesting a movement away from many regional EAE patterns and toward the AAVS configuration. Additionally, we see the emergence of front vowel centralization before /r/, a feature argued to be regionally distinctive to AAE speech in the Washington D.C. area. Overall, this study demonstrates the complex nature of sound change occurring within AAE.

References

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