

Students who speak African American English: Variations by community characteristics

Many African American students are speakers of African American English (AAE). During the elementary grades, their spontaneous discourse can be characterized by more than 40 morphosyntactic and phonological features (Craig, Thompson, Washington, & Potter, 2003; Craig & Washington, 2004, 2006; Washington & Craig, 2002). Understanding of students who are speakers of AAE has improved dramatically over the last decade in part because a new type of measurement has been included in research protocols. The *dialect density measure* (DDM) calculates the rate of feature tokens divided by the number of words or clauses in the sample (Craig, Washington, & Thompson-Porter, 1998; Oetting & McDonald, 2002), and provides a method for analyzing variations in feature use relative to extrinsic and intrinsic child variables. This research has shown that feature production rates vary systematically based on discourse genre (Thompson, Craig, & Washington, 2004; Washington, Craig, & Kushmaul, 1998). Feature production rates also vary systematically by grade, gender, and socioeconomic status but these differences disappear in later elementary grades (Craig & Washington, 2004; Washington & Craig, 1998).

The current study contributes to this growing body of research on AAE-speaking students by exploring variations in morphosyntactic feature production relative to community type. Participants were 209 1st–5th graders. Language samples were collected during spontaneous oral narratives. The communities were comparable geographically, drawn from the northern mid-western United States. However, one was an urban-fringe (UF) community and the other a mid-size central (MC) city. The communities were comparable in terms of a number of structural characteristics (2000 U.S. Census). Both communities had relatively low levels of poverty for African American families (3% and 1%) and all residents in the communities (8% and 5%). Median household incomes were quite similar (approximately \$49,000 and \$43,000); however, African American median household incomes were higher in the UF compared to the MC city (approximately \$55,000 versus \$33,000). The UF and MC city were comparable in terms of the number of African American residents, at approximately 14,000 and 12,000, respectively. However, African Americans represented a large segment of the UF population (47%) but were a minority in the MC city (10%).

The spontaneous discourse of the AAE-speaking students in the two communities reflected considerable systematic variability in morphosyntactic feature production. Feature production rates, measured as DDMs, in the UF community were approximately twice the rates of students in the MC city, and this difference was statistically significant, $t(207) = 5.44$, $p = .000$. There were no significant differences among students relative to grade, gender, or SES. In addition to feature production rates, there were significant differences between the two communities relative to feature types. In both communities, students produced the same types of features overall, but about one-third of the features were more widely dispersed across students in the UF community than in the MC city.

The findings will be discussed in terms of the importance of defining life and learning contexts on multiple levels. Understanding of AAE-speaking students would be improved by distinguishing influences at child, family, neighborhood, and community levels.

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