Much of the work on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has focused on its similarities across the country. In this way, the dialect has been almost solely defined in terms of race, while the vast majority of other dialects studied are defined by the region in which they are spoken. This trend is beginning to change, with a small number of studies focusing their attention on regional varieties of AAVE (c.f. Hinton & Pollock 2000; Fridland 2003; among others). The current study contributes to this line of research, focusing on the speech of African Americans in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Observation of AAVE in Pittsburgh suggests that while African Americans verbally reject ‘Pittsburghese’, connecting it to the speech of White Pittsburghers, there are several features of Pittsburgh speech that African Americans make use of in their own speech, e.g. lexical items such as nebby ‘nosey’; redd up ‘to clean, make ready’, and the ‘needs V-ed’ construction. What is necessary is a fine-grained analysis of Pittsburgh AAVE to determine the extent to which the speech of African Americans and Whites in Pittsburgh differ and/or overlap.

In this paper we focus on one variable, the monophthongization of /aw/, a stereotypical feature of the speech in Pittsburgh (Johnstone et al. 2002, Kiesling et al. 2005), which is very much in the consciousness of many Pittsburghers. It is often reproduced in words like ‘dahntahn’ (downtown) and ‘aht’ (out) in the media, and is frequently mentioned in conversations about Pittsburgh speech. It is the high salience of this feature in the region that makes it a prime candidate for study.

The data are from sociolinguistic interviews collected from inhabitants of an urban working-class African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh. Following Johnstone et al. (2002), all tokens of /aw/ were identified and given a score of 1 (diphthong), 2 (intermediate form) or 3 (monophthong). Preliminary results suggest that while African Americans do not appear to have the stereotypical Pittsburgh monophthongized /aw/ in their speech, there is a weakening of the glide in the production of the diphthong. This is the predominant pattern for both men and women in the 2 age groups examined thus far (1920-1949 and 1950-1969). We interpret the absence of this high-salient feature of Pittsburgh speech as symbolic distancing from the speech of White Pittsburghers, thereby aiding African American Pittsburghers in carving out an ethnic identity separate from Whites. At the same time however, they are able to lay claim to an identity as ‘authentic’ Pittsburghers.
References


