

The Development of Gender-Differentiated Phonetics and Style-Shifting in African American Vernacular English

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The acquisition and emergence of sociolinguistic awareness in children is understudied. We analyze gender-differentiated speech patterns and style-shifting through speech samples of Upper Midwestern African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speaking children aged four and five. We find that children at this age are aware of and exhibit adult patterns of gender-differentiation, and that they appear capable of style-shifting in some features between AAVE and standard Upper Midwestern English (UME). These results give evidence of earlier sociolinguistic milestones compared to previous developmental models (Labov 1964; Nardy et al. 2013).

With respect to gender patterns, we model our research after work by Docherty and Foulkes on the Geordie dialect of English (Docherty & Foulkes 2014). We examine distinctive AAVE phonetic features in vowel, obstruent, and sonorant consonant categories. We compare boys' and girls' rates of /aɪ/ monophthongization, stop glottalization, and non-rhoticity in coda environments, using both acoustic and perceptual methods, including an original technique for diphthong measurement in addition to established techniques (Hillenbrand 1995; Thomas 2011). Like Docherty and Foulkes, we find that children at this age can be aware of and conform to adult patterns of gender-differentiated speech. Namely, they follow Labov's principle of the linguistic conformity of women: that women are more likely to use standard forms in prescribed settings, whereas boys are more likely to use vernacular forms (Labov 2001). This pattern is especially noticeable in the children's levels of /aɪ/ monophthongization. Our work provides cross-dialectal corroborating evidence for Docherty and Foulkes' work showing that children's sociolinguistic awareness begins at an age earlier than predicted by previous work (Labov 1964; Nardy et al. 2013).

In addition to the findings about style awareness, we also find evidence that some of these children style-shift between AAVE and UME features during a conversation with an unfamiliar African American interlocutor who is actively style-shifting. In the following example, the child shifts from non-rhotic to rhotic speech after the interlocutor uses UME. The child makes this change even though this feature is not modeled by the interlocutor, showing that this is not simply phonetic mimicry.

Child: I'm getting yo' ca'
Interlocutor: I don't think they can drive
Child: I'm takin' your car

Recent work has demonstrated that AAVE speaking children at this age are able to vary their syntax in adult-like ways within the dialect (Green & White-Sustaíta 2015). Studies have also suggested that AAVE speaking children at this age are "unwilling or unable" to style-shift between AAVE and standard English, and have found second grade to be the point in children's

development where style-shifting of this type emerges (Van Hofwegen 2015; Craig et al. 2014). We provide evidence that this can happen earlier.

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