

## Twentieth century sound change in Washington DC African American English

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Previous work on the vocalic systems of African American English (AAE) speakers in a number of regional settings has identified both shared vowel configurations, aligning with Thomas's (2007) African American Vowel System (AAVS) configuration (Fridland 2003; Thomas 2007; Kohn 2014), and also some convergence to the local European American variety (e.g. Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2009). Very few studies, though, have examined how regional patterns have changed or developed over time within an African American community and the few that do (e.g. Wolfram and Thomas 2002) have focused on the changing relationships between European American and African American norms in their regional contexts. Comprehensive studies of sound change internal to an ethnic minority community have been exceedingly rare (Blake and Shousterman 2010; Fought 2013). The current study examines the vowel systems of Washington D.C. (DC) African American speakers over real and apparent time, paying particular attention to pan-regional features described in the AAVS (Thomas 2007). Additionally, we focus on two local features not discussed in the AAVS, but found in DC, variation in the onset and glide of /aʊ/ (Thomas 2001) and pre-/r/ front vowel centralization (Luelsdorff 1975).

The data come from a unique (soon to be publically available) corpus of conversational speech by African Americans in DC, comprised of recordings made in 1968 and in 2015, with dates of birth ranging from 1890 to 2002. In the current study, we analyze 40 speakers, balanced for age, sex, and social class. We first present a qualitative analysis of the speakers' vowel systems to identify trends in the vowel systems over time. We then present quantitative analyses focusing on specific vowel classes that appear to be changing over time.

Results indicate three general patterns over time: stability, monotonic change, and curvilinear change. While some features typical of the AAVS, like pre-nasal /ɪ~/ε/ merger and non-prevoiceless /ai/ glide weakening, are stable over time, other features show monotonic change. The longstanding regional voicing pattern of /aʊ/ (Thomas 2001), most evident in the oldest generation, is in recession. For open syllable and pre-voiced tokens (e.g. *now*, *loud*), older speakers' vowel nuclei are fronted and raised with downgliding offglides, while pre-voiceless tokens (e.g. *out*, *house*) have raised nuclei and an upgliding offglide. Younger speakers, however, now have overlapping nuclei and similar upgliding offglides. Pre-/r/ front vowel centralization, a regional feature of AAE (Blake and Shousterman 2010), exhibits an increase over time, with nearly all of the speakers born after 1950 displaying this pattern. Still, other features exhibit a curvilinear pattern. For example, /e~/ε/ nuclei overlap, a pattern expected in the AAVS, is most evident in the middle generation, but lacking for the oldest and youngest speakers. Additionally, /u/ fronting, not associated with the AAVS, is evident only in the middle generation. Taken together, these results suggest a complex pattern of stability and change. The AAE speaking community in DC is undergoing changes that aren't simply movements towards or away from an external norm like a monolithic AAVS, but rather represent the ongoing development of a regionally-based ethnolect.

### References

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