

The perception of prosodic prominence in African American English by naïve listeners
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African American English (AAE) is the most studied language variety in the United States and one of the most studied varieties world-wide (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Schneider 1996; Labov 1998). Over the last fifty years, a great deal of sociolinguistic research has focused on phonetic/phonological and morphosyntactic variables in AAE, but only sporadic research has investigated prosody specifically (Tarone 1973; Rickford 1975; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Green 2002; Cole, Thomas, Britt and Coggshall 2005; Thomas and Carter 2006; McLarty 2011; Thomas 2015). However, perception experiments, some production studies, and anecdotal evidence have suggested that some varieties of AAE exhibit prosodic patterns that differ from those of other varieties of English (Hawkins 1992; Foreman 2000; Thomas and Reaser 2004; Thomas, Lass and Carpenter 2010). Much of the production-based research has largely employed the ToBI paradigm (cf. Beckman et al. 2005) and has demonstrated persistent differences between AAE and European American English (EAE) varieties, with AAE speakers on average using more pitch accents per syllable, while also using L+H* pitch accents at higher rates than European Americans (McLarty and Thomas 2010; McLarty 2011; McLarty 2015; Holliday 2016). Despite these findings, it remains unclear as to the extent to which these ethnic differences, as coded by ToBI, are perceptible by naïve listeners.

Recent work by Cole and colleagues has begun to investigate how naïve listeners perceive prosodic prominence using an on-line coarse prosodic transcription task (cf. Cole, Mo and Hasegawa-Johnson 2010; Cole, Mahrt and Roy 2015; Haulde et al. 2016). This approach asks large numbers of naïve listeners to label prosodic prominence in speech, yielding important new insights into the perception of prosody and prosodic variation. What hasn't been examined as of yet is how listeners perceive prominence in voices of different ethnicities, and how these perceptions correspond to more traditional approaches to prosody (e.g. ToBI).

The current paper, which represents a first step in a larger project, examines how naïve listeners (from the Western US, N= ~80) perceive prominence in the conversational speech of both African Americans and European Americans (from the American South). We ask whether listeners mark prominence in the same way for voices of both ethnicities, and how similar their perceptions of prominence are to ToBI transcriptions by expert analysts.

Results from pilot data indicate that these naïve listeners report perceiving prominence more frequently for African American voices than for European American voices ($p < .05$). Additionally, we find a relationship between naïve prominence perception and ToBI labels, specifically perceived prominence and the L+H* accent (cf. Haulde et al. 2016). Future work using different listener groups from different dialect regions will determine whether the present results differ from ratings by listeners who report having greater familiarity with AAE (and greater familiarity with Southern speech). Thus, this project will afford a deeper understanding of how different ethnic varieties encode and perceive prosodic prominence, and of prosodic production and perception as a whole.

Selected References

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