

Linguistic Accommodation in a time of community conflict

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Venue of study

- A specialized middle school for “at risk” youth in urban Cincinnati. The school, which drew students from all over Cincinnati, was in an economically depressed area. Students had failed at least one grade, most of the time more.
- The study formed the basis of a doctoral dissertation in literacy and linguistics.
- I was assigned to the school as an English teacher and reading specialist. I had been working for the Cincinnati Public Schools for 10 years.



Social Context

- **In 2001, Cincinnati was experiencing significant racial tensions, especially in the area where the school was located. These culminated in riots, shortly after the data for this study were collected.**



Linguistic Varieties at the School

- **English was the only language spoken at New Vista Middle, but the presence of several English varieties made it a multi-lingual learning community. There were three English varieties in use at New Vista Middle School during the study. African American Vernacular English, the dominant linguistic variety, spoken by all students to some extent. I had the impression that many non-African American teachers accommodated to AAVE and used it occasionally in instruction. A second variety, Midwest Standard, the prestige variety, was used over the P.A. System, in some instruction, in bureaucratic correspondence and in high-stakes testing. The public schools called this variety “Market Place English.” We were supposed to make students speak this variety, but we were not very successful. A third variety, an attenuated form of Southern Mountain English, or Appalachian English, was highly stigmatized**

An observation by the teachers

- Teachers observed that Urban Appalachians and other WAVE
- students adopted the speech characteristics of the African American majority. Teachers viewed it in various ways:
- As hardly worth mentioning.
- As an “intrusion of Black English” into classroom which would inhibit acquisition of “correct” English.
- As an interesting and perhaps inevitable consequence of ethnically diverse schools and neighborhoods.
- Part of pandemic “bad grammar.”
- Considered the suggestion that there is a characteristic African Americans language a sign of bigotry.
- Think back to the Ebonics controversy ([Smitherman, 2000](#)).



Were we seeing accommodation?

- **Accommodation occurs when one linguistic variety absorbs traits of another (Trudgill, 1974) It had been widely studied, but not in a venue such as this. Wolfram (2002) studied the accommodative patterns between Euro-Appalachians and African Americans in a remote area of North Carolina, but our school's venue was entirely different. At least 95% of our students were African American; there were also urban Appalachians, mostly second generation, and low socioeconomic whites.**



Accommodation

- The sociolinguistic notion that people alter style, register, and variety of speech depending on situation and interlocutor was elaborated by such early researchers as [Giles & Powesland \(1975\)](#) and (Trudgill, 1974). A few recent studies:
 - Brown (2006) Speech involves complex choices in the negotiation of ethnic identity. Prestige and power relationships influence these choices.
 - Chiosain (2007) Studied speakers of three Gaelic dialects. The result that accommodation is less likely to occur between dialects equal in prestige
 - Stewart-Smith (2006). Notes Trudgill's work on diffusion, or spreading of linguistic change across geographic regions via linguistic accommodation, tendency of people to copy speech characteristics of interlocutors. Raises possibility that accommodation may occur via TV, though author believes this may be difficult to demonstrate.
 - Kerswill (2000). Studied koinenization. Results from language contact in new regions where there is no previously established dialect..
 - Robertson & Murachver (2007) Studied accommodation in intimate, abusive relationships.
 - Reid & Giles (2005). Studied accommodation as a dynamic in intergroup relations.

Demographics, Fall 2000

- **Approximately 450 students attended New Vista Middle School, Cincinnati, a “Port of Entry city” where new arrivals from Appalachia first settled when they left that region. The New Vista program was experimental, highly disciplined and required a great deal of academic work from students unused and disinclined to perform it. Twenty-two of these students were Euro-Americans and the remainder African American. Thus, approximately 5 % of the population was Euro-American when I undertook to do the study.**



Special considerations

- **Marginality of WAVE students; sense of vulnerability and invisibility.**
- **Lack of trust between community and police; community and schools**
- **Racial tensions in community, mirrored in school.**



Immigrants in their native country

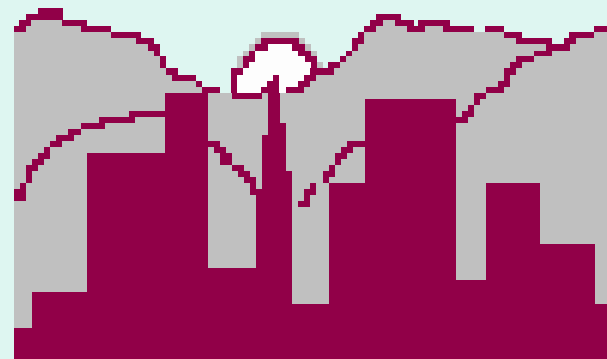
- High dropout rate among Urban Appalachians ([Southern Regional Council, Working Paper 8, 2000](#)).
- Suggestion Urban Appalachians were “pushed out” of schools. Along with the rest of the staff at the New Vista Middle School, I had presumed that all of our Euro-American (i.e., white) students were of Appalachian origin.
- This was incorrect. In the sample of five Euro-American students, three were Appalachian, two were not.
- I use the designation WAVE-speaker (White American Varieties of English) ([Mufwene, 1996](#)).



The accommodation study

Aimed to determine whether WAVE-speaking students at New Vista School showed *linguistic markers* of African American Vernacular English in their relaxed speech with each other, and whether there was a difference in the presence and/or number of these markers when conversing with African Americans.

An additional motivation for wanting to do this study. The school system did not target Urban Appalachian youngsters as a population at risk, grouping them instead with whites, and in a few cases, Blacks. I believed it was important to learn all we could about this minority population.



Research Questions

1. Would one find linguistic markers of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) speech in the relaxed conversation of WAVE (White American Varieties of English) speakers at New Vista Middle School?
2. Would the speech production of WAVE-speaking students at New Vista show greater incidence of AAVE markers when they were conversing with AAVE speakers?

The Sample



- To utilize chi-square, it was preferable for at least five New Vista WAVE speakers to take part. Issues of gender balance made it desirable that at least six WAVE subjects be included-- three males and three females.
- not possible to persuade three WAVE-speaking males. experimental group consisted of five WAVE-speaking subjects, a sample of convenience formed by discussing the project with the eight WAVE speakers still in attendance at New Vista Middle School in January of 2001. Six AAVE-speaking participants served to create a multi-lingual condition for the WAVE speakers. These were drawn on a volunteer basis from my classes. a questionnaire was administered asking for participants' and parents' birthplace and parents' occupation.

The interviews

- There were a total of 5 group interviews: two monoethnic, three multiethnic.
- There were a total of 11 participants: 6 African Americans: 3 males, 3 females;
- 5 WAVE speakers: 3 females, 2 males. One was used as a place holder in an extra interview.
- Focus was on the speech of the WAVE speakers. The African Americans were providing a multi-ethnic condition.

WAVE Subjects

Study name	Age and Grade	Background	Other information
Sam	Age 14, grade 8	Urban Appalachian Visits family in KY	SBH class; violent fights with African Americans
Craig	Age 15, grade 7	Middle American White/ South African minority	
Desiree	Age 13, grade 6	Middle American White	Father is a police officer
Mandy	Age 14, grade 6	Urban Appalachian	Frequent absences from school
Annabel	Age 15, grade 8	Urban Appalachian	Frequent suspensions from school. Assaulted a teacher.

Interviews

- I made every effort to create an atmosphere where participants would speak freely in what William Labov ([1972](#)) calls a relaxed style of speech. Participants were informed this was a study of teenage speech, and that some boys, some girls, some Blacks, to represent various groups. It was emphasized that we were engaged in research having nothing to do with school. . Profanity during the ordinary flow of conversation was permitted. Sometimes, students talked for a full hour without my doing anything other than and insuring everyone spoke. A list of questions was ready, but these were only used when participants were not talking, or if they had gone off on an unproductive tangent.



Transcribing data

- Tapes were transcribed using a word processor coupled with a Panasonic Variable Speech Control machine and typed play script style with participant names in the left margin. A transcript—about 180 pages in all-- was produced, and this became the reference documents for the study. One-subject transcripts were prepared and examined for each of seven *linguistic markers*. Employing discourse analysis, instances were designated where given markers could have occurred but did not. Actual and possible occurrences of the linguistic markers were then tabulated; tables were constructed, and ratios were calculated.



Choice of markers

- **These were the speech markers examined in the study:**
 - s-marker deletion**
 - copula deletion**
 - plural deletion**
 - possessive deletion**
 - multiple negation**
 - invariant be**
 - completive done**
 - remote time been**
 - future predictive 'Ima.'**

Some of these (such as s-marker deletion) may occur in Appalachian English as well as in AAVE, their incidence in AAVE is much higher.

Tracking incidence of individual markers

- Data were examined marker by marker and subject by subject. The chart at the right shows how Jeremiah, an AAVE-speaking teenager, deletes the 's' in such sentences as 'He study hard.'

Actual	Other poss.	Total poss.	Ratio
7	6	13	0.5385

Comparisons

- **Data also tabulated for WAVE speakers. Here, there were two sets of data to compare—the incidence of linguistic markers in the mono-ethnic and in the multi-ethnic condition. Occurrences were tabulated, using discourse analysis to obtain figures for possible use. A ratio was then calculated. The table for example, compares Craig’s use of ‘invariant be’ in the two conditions. ‘**

Mono Eth			
Actual	Alt Form	Possible	Ratio
1	151	152	0.0066

Summarizing incidence of markers

- Table summarizes proportions of AAVE marker usage by WAVE subjects in monoethnic in comparison and multiethnic conditions. The chi square statistic was used to test for significance. The difference between the AAVE speakers and their WAVE counterparts was also compared in this way. When the results for a male subject who had been used as a “gender place holder” in an interview were equivocal, the supplementary data thus acquired were used to provide additional information.

WAVE			AAVE	
Subject	Mono	Mixed	Subject	Mixed
Amanda	0.0662	0.1433	Curtis	0.0603
Annabel	0.0422	0.1056	Jeremiah	0.1667
Craig	0.0883	0.1364	Lamont	0.1429
Desiree	0.0211	0.0244	Marinda	0.2142
Sam	0.0458	0.0268	Marveena	0.2387
Means	0.0527	0.0873	Shadqua	0.1392
				0.1603

Analysis of Data

The significant value for chi-square at the .05 level, with one degree of freedom is 3.84. Annabel and Amanda scored well above this significant level. Sam and Desiree did not. Craig's initial figures, while they did not meet the test of significance at the .05 level, were high. It was possible that if one examined more instances of his speech under the multi-ethnic condition, he could be considered an accommodator. Using data from interview four as well as interview one and two, Craig met the significance test. Of the five WAVE subjects three showed increased accommodation when paired with AAVE interlocutors. The data thus failed to support to Null Hypothesis #2 which predicted no change in the incidence of AAVE markers between monoethnic and multiethnic conditions.

This table shows the chi-square values of WAVE subjects, showing significance under mono- and multi-ethnic conditions

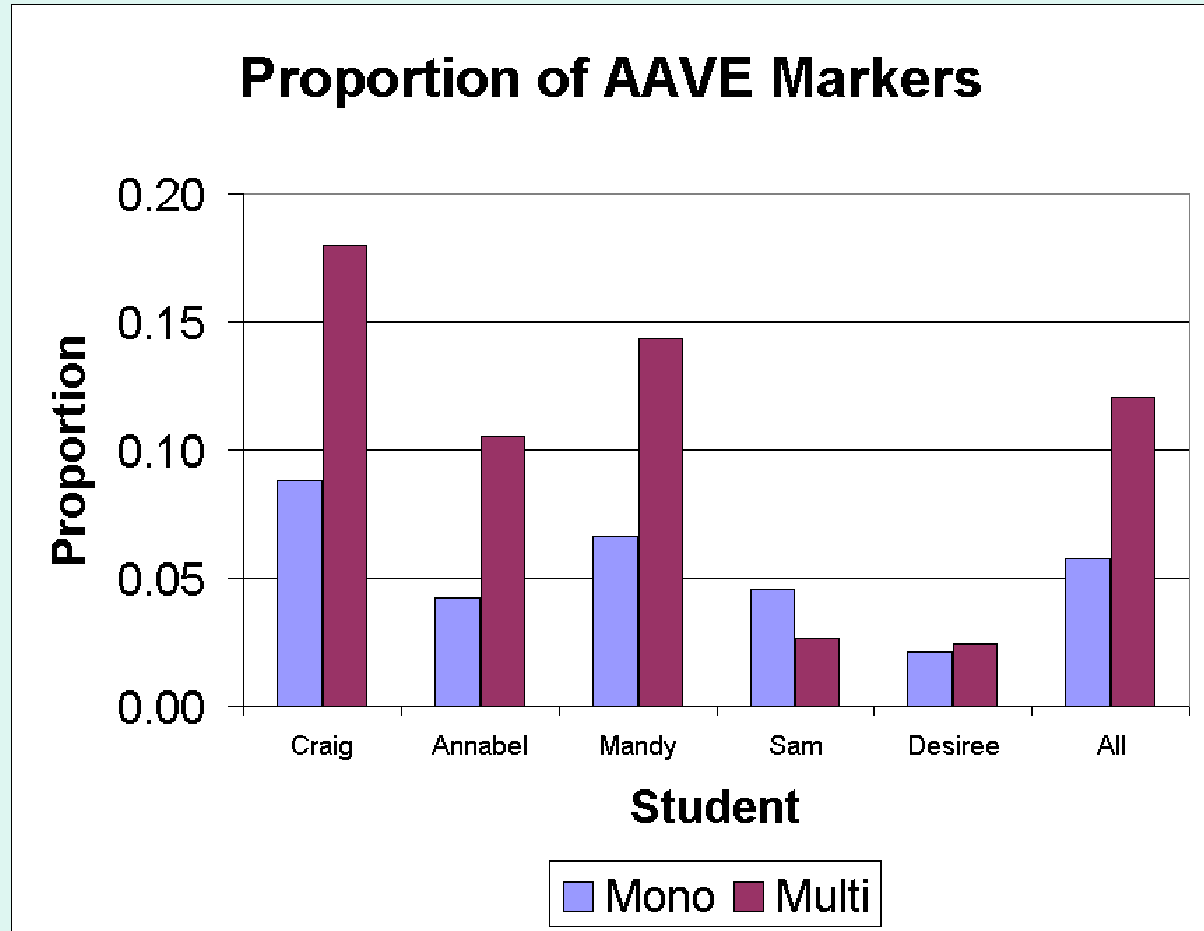
Subject	Chi sq
Annabel	6.76
Craig	2.84
Sam	0.57
Desiree	0.23
Amanda	5.01

Results

- Suggest both long-term and short-term accommodation.
- Significant difference in the mono- and multi- ethnic conditions.
- Results are summarized in chart below.

Proportion of AAVE Marker Use: Mono- and Multi- Ethnic Conditions

Subject	Mono	Multi
Craig	0.0883	0.1797
Annabel	0.0422	0.1056
Mandy	0.0662	0.1433
Sam	0.0458	0.0268
Desiree	0.0211	0.0244
All	0.0578	0.1205



The height of each bar indicates the extent to which AAVE markers were present in the speech of each subject. The two bars for each subject can be compared to see whether the context (mono or multi) made any difference.

Why accommodation occurred

Solidarity ?

Language & Identity? (cache and negative prestige of AAVE)

Anti-language?

Enacting of resistance to program?

Adolescent Conformity?

More likely— none of the above.
Accommodation is apparently something linguistics varieties do, when there is sufficient contact.

