

## 22. African-Americans

The Atlas of North American English includes a considerable amount of social information, but it is not a sociolinguistic investigation. It is a study of the regional distribution of phonological patterns, with a strong focus on change in progress. Chapter 4 described the Telsur sampling procedure of selecting surnames identified with the dominant ethnic groups in each speech community. The purpose was to avoid the selection of particular ethnic groups which for one reason or another had remained linguistically separate from the main community. Table 4.2 showed that the largest single ethnic identification of Telsur speakers was German (216), followed by English, Scots-Irish, Irish, Italian, Scandinavian, French, and Polish. None of the many multivariate analyses reported in the previous chapters found a significant effect of ethnicity, a finding consonant with other studies which show that ethnicity and language background are the weakest of all the social correlates of language in the urban speech community (Labov 2001). There is generally no significant difference between the second and third generations of each ethnic group in the mainstream population (Allen 1973; Labov 1976).

This finding does not apply to language and ethnic groups that are generally classified as “minorities.” The U.S. census 2000 figures show 12.3% African-American and 12.5% Latino.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the English of the Latino minority have found distinguishing features in the English of the second and later generations (Wolfram 1974; Santa Ana 1991; Wald 1981). Many of these are common to the English of those whose families spoke the Spanish dialects of the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America.<sup>2</sup> Several studies have found sharp divisions within the Latino community in orientation towards the surrounding local white dialect, African-American English, and traditional Spanish-speaking culture (Poplack 1978; Fought 1999, 2003). The Telsur sample was not designed to provide the fine-grained social data that could distinguish and report on these subgroups. The seven Telsur speakers who gave their ethnic identification as “Hispanic” were not part of a systematic effort to study the Latino speech community; on the contrary, they generally represent individuals who are integrated into the mainstream speech community.

The African-American speech community is structured quite differently. There is a well-studied continuum that extends from a standard African-American English, distinguished from middle-class Euro-American English by only a few phonetic features, to African-American Vernacular English [AAVE], which shows sharp phonetic and grammatical divergence from European-American varieties. Many convergent studies show that AAVE is a relatively uniform dialect, spoken across the United States with relatively little regional differentiation by the great majority of African Americans living in districts with large African-American populations (NYC: Labov et al. 1968; Detroit: Wolfram 1969; Washington: Fasold 1972; Los Angeles: Baugh 1983; Philadelphia: Labov and Harris 1986; Texas: Bailey 1993, Cukor-Avila 1995; North Carolina: Wolfram 1992). Geographic differences that have been reported so far for AAVE are limited to such phonetic effects of the surrounding dialect as the rate of *r*-vocalization (NYC: Labov 1966; Philadelphia: Myhill 1988). Numerous studies report that African-Americans do not participate in the regional vowel shifts that have been the main focus of this Atlas (Thomas 1989, 2000; Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986).<sup>3</sup> The Telsur studies of the major cities of the Northeast, the North, the Midland, and the West were

not designed to obtain a representative sample of the African-Americans in those cities. Of the 44 interviews with African-Americans in Table 4.2, 18 were with individuals outside the South who showed no marked features of AAVE.<sup>4</sup>

The situation in the South is quite different. At least for the older, rural speakers who form the backbone of the LAMSAS data, it might be said of phonology as it was said of lexicon, that “by and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his level of education” (Kurath 1949: 6). Thomas 1989, Bailey 1987, and Wolfram, Thomas, and Green 2000 show that this is only a rough approximation. It is clear that an accounting of the regional dialect of the South cannot ignore the speech of African-Americans. We need to know the extent to which African-Americans match, surpass or lag behind Whites in the active sound changes that define this region, and how they might have contributed to its formation. Using the techniques described in Section 4.6, we located the areas of the largest Southern cities in which a high percentage of the population was African-American, and obtained 23 interviews with African-American subjects in those areas.

Map 22.1 shows the locations of the 44 Telsur subjects who identified themselves as African-American.



### 22.1. Ongoing mergers in the African-American community

A number of differences between African-Americans and Whites have emerged so far. Chapter 7 showed that African-Americans have a much lower probability of using constricted [r] than Whites, and have maintained *r*-less pronunciation in areas of the South where Whites have become completely *r*-full. Chapter 9 found that African-Americans have led in the merger of /i/ and /e/ before nasals. In Chapter 20, it was found that African-Americans tended to use different terms for ‘carbonated beverage’ than Whites, and were more likely to accept the construction *needs washed*.

Table 22.1 compares Whites (W) to African-Americans (AA) for seven phonological features studied in Chapters 7–9, based on minimal pairs and the frequency of *r*-vocalization. The table shows for each city and ethnic group the numbers of subjects who satisfied the criterion for that variable out of the total number of subjects. Seven cities within the regional dialect of the South are listed in the upper part of the table, and four cities outside of the South in the lower part.

- <sup>1</sup> The discussion in this chapter will exclude Canada, where the majority of the population of African ancestry immigrated relatively recently from Caribbean countries and shows comparatively little divergence from European Canadian speech in the Canadian-born generation.
- <sup>2</sup> Simplification of coda clusters /rt, rd/; alternation of palatal affricates and fricatives; weakening of prosodic constraints on coronal stop deletion.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas (1989) reports some fronting of /ow/ among African-American high school students in Columbus, Ohio.
- <sup>4</sup> Despite the general finding that most African-Americans do not participate in local sound changes in Northern cities, there are always individuals who are integrated into the surrounding community.