

Reactions to African-American Vernacular English:  
Do More Phonological Features Matter?

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the strength of speaker accent and subsequent listener judgments about the speaker. The study employed a 3x2 factorial design featuring speaker accent (strong AAVE/ moderate AAVE/ mainstream U.S. English) and listener ethnicity (ethnic majority/ ethnic minority). Results demonstrated that listeners rated speakers with strong AAVE accents both less attractive and less status-possessing than speakers with moderate AAVE accents, who in turn were rated as less attractive and status-possessing than speakers with mainstream U. S. English accents. In addition, listener ethnicity also had an impact resembling in-group bias. Even so, the results still demonstrated a trend consistent with the generalization that both dominant and non-dominant group members internalize the language ideology that favors so-called "standard" speakers.

Key Words: speaker evaluations, language attitudes, accent scaling, African-American Vernacular English

Since its inception in the 1930's, language attitudes as a field of study, language attitudes research is research that has demonstrated that language is a powerful force that does more than convey intended referential information. For better or worse, hearers react to speech rate, gender-linked language, or code-switching and paralinguistic variation in messages as well. However, among all language behaviors, the most

though they indicate both personal and social characteristics studied and perhaps the most socially significant is accent

teristics of the speaker. For example, a stranger may be judged incompetent due simply to a slow rate of speech reactions to varieties of accents found throughout the (Brown, 1980). Because such beliefs about language world, including the United States, and have found that

use can bias social interaction, language attitudes really matter greatly (see Bradac, Cargile & Halett, 2001). Those who speak with an accent deemed "standard" within a particular community (i.e., the variety

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most often associated with institutional control and power, see Edwards, 1982) tend to be rated highly on traits related to competence, intelligence, and social status, whereas "non-standard" accented speakers are evaluated less favorably along these same dimensions, even by listeners who themselves speak with a nonstandard accent (Ryan, Hewstone & Giles, 1984). This patterned reaction is particularly robust in the case of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Of all the varieties of non-mainstream U. S. English, the most researched and perhaps most stigmatized variety is African-American Vernacular English, with one exception (cf, Koch & Gross, 1997), AAVE speakers are always downgraded on status-related traits (i.e., "education" or "wealth") when compared to mainstream U. S. English (MUSE) speakers; half of the time

this is combined with favorable (Buck, 1968; Garner & Rubin, 1986; Irwin, 1977; Johnson & Buttny, 1982; Speicher & McMahan, 1992), and half of the time with unfavorable (Bishop, 1979; Doss & Gross, 1992; Doss & Gross, 1994; Larimer, Beatty & Broadus, 1988; White, Vandiver, Becker, Overstreet, Teple, Hagan & Mandelbaum, 1998), attractiveness-related evaluations (i.e., "warm" or "kind"). Such a pattern of responses can be viewed as form of language patronization and undoubtedly stems from more generalized stereotypes that often portray African-Americans as less intelligent but equally if not more friendly than whites (Bankart, 1972; Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999; Mayovich, 1972).

Even though stereotypes about language use are tied to social stereotypes, they are not necessarily equivalent. Over the years, a number of language attitude scholars (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Lambert, 1967; Robinson, 1972) have argued that a speaker's language may call up in the listener's mind a particular social category that, in turn, is responsible for inferences about the speaker's characteristics. Yet identification of a speaker's social group membership alone does not sufficiently determine their evaluation. Instead, speakers are judged based on an entire configuration of factors (see Cargile & Bradac, 2001), including attributions unique to language.

Because the variation present in natural language makes it a supreme marker of identity, language behaviors are among the most salient and often used cues in social interaction (see Cargile, Giles & Clement, 1995). Hearers often make attributions regarding a speaker's personal identification with a social group based on his/her language. Consequently, evaluations of a speaker known to be a member of an given ethnic

minority group typically change when she or he

switches from Mainstream U. S, English (MUSE) to

the non-standard variety associated with group mem

bership (e.g., Cargile, 2000; Koch, Gross & Kolts,

2(X)1). Thus, it is the case that evaluations based on

language use are not necessarily equivalent to those

based on other forms of social group identification.

As hearers typically infer the degree of social group identification based on language use, several language attitude studies have explored the effects that the degree of non-standardness may have on speaker evaluations. For example, participants in a study by Ryan, Carranza, and Moffie (1977) evaluated eight different (Mexican) Spanish-accented speakers of English; some whose Spanish accents were strong, others whose accents were moderate or barely perceptible. They found that even small increments in accent were associated with gradually less favorable ratings along traits related to both a speaker's perceived status and attractiveness. This same pattern -in which stronger non-standard accents are more severely downgraded than either moderate accents or standard speech- has also been demonstrated in other contexts (Boyd, 2003; Brennan & Brennan, 1981; Cargile & Giles, 1998; Giles, 1972; Nesdale & Rooney, 1990), but curiously has never been explored in the most researched non-standard variety of American-English: African-American Vernacular English,

Provided the prominence of AAVE in American social life, we felt that this lacunae should be addressed. Both previous research and anecdotal evidence suggest that speakers with stronger AAVE accents are stigmatized to a greater degree than speakers with moderate AAVE accents. However, because the effect of accent strength in the case of AAVE has not been observed, we designed this study to answer the following research question: Will the strength of a speakers accent, as operationalized by the number of phonological features of AAVE present, influence judgments that listeners make about them?

## Method

This study centered around a 3x2 factorial design featuring speaker accent (strong AAVE/ moderate AAVE/ mainstream U.S. English) and listener ethnicity (ethnic majority/ ethnic minority)- included as a factor here because it has been observed to influence speaker evaluations occasionally (Carranza & Ryan, 1975; Gallois, Callan & Johnstone, 1984; Rubin & Smith,

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1988; Rubin, Healy, Gardiner, Zath & Moore, 1997; Tucker & Lambert, 1969; White & Li, 1991),

In order to enhance the generalizability of the results, a 'verbal guise' design (Ball & Giles, 1982) was used in which respondents evaluated six native speakers representing the three different accent conditions. Although other designs, such as the 'matched guise' technique (Lambert, 1967), minimize threats to internal validity more effectively, they typically use a single speaker and thus provide a poor foundation for claims about accents (see Jackson & Jacobs, 1983; Jackson, 1992). Moreover, we felt that manipulation of the number of phonological features would prove challenging for even native bi-dialectical speakers and might result in inauthentic guises. Consequently, we chose to record a wide variety of speakers speaking naturally and selected those with comparable voice qualities and rates of speech. Speakers were then matched according to the accent condition that they best represented.

This process resulted in the careful selection of six speakers: four African-American females provided the AAVE recordings and two Anglo-American females provided the MUSE recordings. Because we opted for a verbal guise design, multiple speakers were needed to represent each accent condition. Rather than fatigue participants by asking them to evaluate twelve speakers- as would be required by a balanced design, we decided to control for the effects of speaker sex and only use female voices.

Each of the six female speakers was recorded reading a brief definition of the term "achievement motivation" (see Appendix). Despite the banality of some texts used in language attitude studies (e.g., children's stories), no text is ever really "neutral" or free from evaluative implications (see Giles & Coupland, 1991; Giles, Coupland, Henwood, Harriman & Coupland, 1992), thus we chose a text that merely reinforced the academic context in which participants were already evaluating the speakers.

Because it was critical that the selected speakers actually represented different levels of AAVE, the recordings were evaluated according to both the number of phonological features present and the subjective impressions that they fostered.

### Phonological Features.

Speaker 7.-This speaker's reading of the text was characterized by the presence of 11 phonological features of AAVE as identified by Bailey and Thomas

(1998) and Rickford (1999). There were 6 instances of final cluster reduction. This feature is particularly prevalent when the final cluster ends with the phonemes /t/ and /d/ and was observed in the pronunciation of the words "achievement" (twice), "significant", "accomplishment", and "and" (twice). There was one instance of tensing of a lax vowel, which occurred in the pronunciation of the word "said". There was one instance of medial syllable deletion, observed in the deletion of the middle syllable during the pronunciation of the word "excellence". There were also 3 instances of deletion of a post-vocalic 'r' (an 'r' after a vowel is deleted). These were observed in the pronunciation of the second syllables in the words "desire", "standards", and "understand". This speaker's reading was further done with more varied intonation, another characteristic of AAVE.

Speaker 2. This speaker's reading of the text was characterized by the presence of 12 phonological features of AAVE. There were 6 instances of final cluster reduction observed in the pronunciation of the words "achievement", "significant", "accomplishment", "and" (twice), and "understand". Deletion of a final consonant was observed in the pronunciation of the copula 'is'. The interdental fricative /θ/ and /ð/ are substituted by the stops /t/ and /d/ respectively) was observed in the pronunciation of the word "the". There was one instance of medial syllable deletion, observed in the deletion of the middle syllable during the pronunciation of the word "excellence". There were also 3 instances of deletion of a post-vocalic 'r' observed in the pronunciation of the second syllables in the words "standards", "understand", and "effort".

Speaker 3: This speaker's reading of the text was characterized by the presence of 7 phonological features of AAVE. There were 3 instances of final cluster reduction, observed in the pronunciation of the words "significant", "accomplishment", and "understand". The feature stopping of an interdental fricative was observed in the pronunciation of the word "the". There was one instance of monophthongization (the diphthong /aɪ/ is pronounced as a monophthong) in the pronunciation of the word "desire". There were also 2 instances of deletion of a post-vocalic 'r' observed in the pronunciation of the second syllables in the words "standards", and "understand".

Speaker 4: This speaker's reading of the text was characterized by the presence of 7 phonological features of AAVE. There were 4 instances of final cluster reduction, observed in the pronunciation of the words

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"achievement" (twice), "significant", and "accomplishment". The feature stopping of an interdental fricative was observed in the pronunciation of the word "the". There was one instance of medial syllable deletion, observed in the deletion of the middle syllable during the pronunciation of the word "excellence". There was also 1 instance of deletion of a post-vocalic 'r' observed in the pronunciation of the second syllable in the word "understand".

Speakers 5 and 6: These speakers were selected to represent the Mainstream U. S. English condition. As expected, neither speaker exhibited any phonological features characteristic of AAVE.

#### Subjective Impressions.

After linguistic analysis confirmed that the selected speakers exhibited matched and varying degrees of AAVE (i.e., two "strong" AAVE speakers, two "moderate" AAVE speakers, two MUSE speakers), a pretest sample of participants was asked to assess how "accented" the speakers sounded. On a Likert response item where seven represented "very accented" speech and one represented "unaccented (native-like)" speech, the first pair of AAVE speakers (numbers 1 and 2) received the highest combined ratings ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). The second pair of African-American speakers were also rated as having an "accent" ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), whereas the pair of Anglo-Americans were perceived as standard (i.e., "unaccented") speakers ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). An ANOVA analysis indicated that these means were significantly different [ $F(2,182) = 43.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .32$ ] and post-hoc tests confirmed that each mean was significantly different from each other mean (Tukey HSD,  $p < .01$ ).

Satisfied that the stimulus voices represented corresponding levels of the independent variable, 283 undergraduates at a major Western urban university were recruited to participate in this study. The sample had an average age of 19.06 years, consisted of 104 men and 178 women (I declined to state), 126 Anglos, 17 African-Americans, 59 Hispanics, 75 Asian-Americans, and 6 other/declined to state. For the purposes of this study, Anglos respondents were treated as "ethnic majority", and all others as "ethnic minority" listeners. Participants

listened to and evaluated the six audio tape-recorded speakers on eight items from the original 30 item Speech Evaluation Instrument (Zahn & Hopper, 1985), The four status ("intelligent-unintelligent", "richpoor", "upper class-lower class", "educated-unedu

cated") and four attractiveness ("kind-unkind", "sweet-sour", "likeable-unlikeable", "friendly-unfriendly") items were selected on the basis of their consistently high factor loading scores (Atkins, 1993; Cargile, 1997; Cargile & Giles, 1997; Zabn, 1990).

Although speaker evaluations have been promoted as a attitudinal measure less sensitive to the bias social desirability than others (Larimer et al., 1988), this bias has nonetheless been recently documented (Cargile, 2002). Viewing this, an effort to further minimize the effect of this bias was undertaken here. Namely, participants were made to complete their evaluations rapidly so as to induce "automatic", stereotypical responses to speakers rather than "controlled", socially desirable ones (see Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson & Howard, 1997). To do this, each of the six recordings was digitally edited into segments and then randomly ordered onto a master compact disc. Each segment was roughly 1 to 2 seconds in length and separated by 1,1 seconds of silence. During this very brief pause, participants quickly marked their evaluation of the speaker on only one Likert-scaled item before preparing to evaluate the next speaker. In this way, the potential confounds of less authentic, socially desirable responses and the effect of presentation order were minimized, if not eliminated entirely.

#### Results

Despite the chaotic nature of hurriedly marking evaluative items for 48 randomly ordered speech segments representing six different speakers, the status and attractiveness subscales demonstrated sufficient reliability (Cronbach's alpha equaled .77 and .80, respectively). Consequently, item scores were averaged for each subscale and used as dependent measures in a 3 (speaker accent) x 2 (listener ethnicity) repeated measures MANOVA. A significant main effect was found for speaker accent,  $\lambda = .19$ ,  $F(4, 561) = 586.84$ ,  $p < .001$ , as well as for the two-way interaction between speaker accent and listener ethnicity,  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $E(4, 561) = 4.76$ ,  $p < .01$ . Subsequent univariate tests indicated that speaker accent influenced ratings of both attractiveness,  $F(2, 1128) = 303.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .35$ , and status,  $E(2, 1128) = 1578.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .74$ , and that the interaction effect was significant for both types of evaluations as well- attractiveness,  $E(2, 1128) = 6.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ; status.  $E(2, 1128) = 10.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ .

Following the finding of these significant effects, reverse Helmert contrasts revealed that participants

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rated the MUSE speakers as more attractive ( $M = 5.07$ ) than the moderate AAVE speakers ( $M = 4.49$ ),  $F(1, 564) = 228.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .34$ , and the moderate AAVE speakers in turn more attractive than the strong AAVE speakers ( $M = 3.54$ ),  $E(1, 564) = 332.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .37$ . Similarly, participants rated the MUSE speakers as more status-possessing ( $M = 5.78$ ) than the moderate AAVE speakers ( $M = 4.23$ ),  $E(1, 564) = 1950.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .78$ , and the moderate AAVE speakers in turn more status-possessing than the strong AAVE speakers ( $M = 2.82$ ),  $E(1, 564) = 960.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .63$ . Interestingly, the mean pro

gressions for both types of evaluations are striking linear, particularly for the status ratings- the shape of which cannot be distinguished from a straight line,  $R^2 = .99$ ,  $F(1,3) = 1648.60$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Regarding the interaction between speaker accent and listener ethnicity, the trend in all cases was for ethnic minority participants to evaluate AAVE speakers more favorably and MUSE speakers less favorably

across both attractiveness and status-related traits. Although consistent, this trend was slight and significant differences were found in only two of the six post-hoc comparisons (see Table 1),

Table I. Comparison of mean ratings across listener ethnicity and speaker accent.

ATTRACTIVENESS RATINGS STATUS RATINGS

MUSE

Moderate  
AAVE

Strong

AAVE

Discussion

Ethnic Majority Ethnic Minority  
Listeners Listeners

5.23 4.91\*  
4.47 4.49  
3.48 3.60

This study was designed to answer a simple and relevant research question: does the degree of AAVE used by speakers influence judgments that listeners make about them? The qualified answer to this question is an emphatic yes. Listeners rated speakers with strong AAVE accents both less attractive and less status-possessing than speakers with moderate AAVE accents, who in turn were rated as less attractive and status-possessing than speakers with MUSE accents. Even though these findings are robust given both the verbal-guise design and large number of participants, it is important to qualify them with respect to context: they

Ethnic Majority  
Listeners

5.86

4.16

2.66

Ethnic Minority  
Listeners

5.70

4.31

2.98\*

\*TukeyHSD, p<.001

apply to female AAVE speakers in a status-stressing situation.

In addition to answering the above research question, this study also revealed two further trends. First, the downgrading of AAVE speech was linear, both with respect to the mean ratings and the number of phonological features constituting the accent conditions (i.e., the "strong" accents contained nearly twice as many features as the "moderate" accents). Such a finding is notable and begs the question to what extent does such linearity apply in describing reactions to AAVE? For example, would evaluations of "slight" AAVE accented speakers (e.g., those exhibiting three features) be significantly different from and fall between those of

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moderate AAVE and MUSE speakers? Would the data demonstrated that listeners rated speakers with

ings of even more strongly accented speakers continue strong AAVE accents lower in attractiveness and lower to be downgraded or is there some plateau of accent in status than speakers with MUSE accents. Several

scaling beyond which further negative evaluations are additional trends emerged from the data, First, the down-  
not made? Continued exploration of this trend toward grading of AAVE speech was linear. Another trend  
linearity would be interesting. showed that listener ethnicity had an impact resembling

A second trend revealed in this study regards the in-group bias. Finally, the results also showed a large  
influence of listener ethnicity on speaker evaluations. trend consistent with the generalization that both domi-  
As the mean ratings in table 1 demonstrate, listener nant and non-dominant group members internalize the  
ethnicity had an impact resembling in-group bias (see language ideology that favors speakers who are deemed

Abrams & Hogg, 1987): both MUSE and AAVE speak-"standard." The implications of these results are limers  
were evaluated more favorably by their respective ited contextually and apply to female AAVE speakers  
"in-groups" (i.e., ethnic majority and ethnic minority in situations that stress status.  
listeners, respectively). Even so, the larger trend here  
was consistent with the generalization that both dominant  
and non-dominant group members internalize the APPENDIX  
language ideology that favors so-called "standard"  
speakers (Lippi-Green, 1997; Ryan et al., 1984). In this Message text: What is Achievement Motivation?  
instance, even ethnic minority listeners. It is the desire for significant accomplishment and a  
focus on attaining very high standards of excellence.  
Individuals who understand what it takes and put for  
Conclusion the effort to do the job well are said to be high in achievement  
motivation.  
The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship  
between the strength of speaker accent and subsequent  
respondent judgments about the speaker. These

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