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African American Ebonics: Discourse & Discursive Practice—A Chicago Case Study of Historical Oppression

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ABSTRACT
The nature of inequality within African American communities is a well-studied phenomenon that continues to yield new insights into how human beings interact in broad terms. Work relations, housing inequity, occupational unevenness to discourse following the end of the “Race Era,” racism, and inequality have all encouraged numerous discussions about African Americans. The literature addressing African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and racial inequality does not focus on the way in which the use of dialect within AAVE reveals critical issues of power and oppression. In other words, scholars have not used dialect as a means of tracing historical oppression. Using principles of critical discourse analysis as a lens, this article outlines the way in which African American English as a communicative event gives insight into the socioeconomic, historical, cultural, and political context in which people and communities are situated. Using the Northern city of Chicago as a case study, I demonstrate that Blacks in the largest city in the Midwest use a rural Southern style dialect in the speech performance of AAVE because of historical social isolation and a legacy of segregation. The way in which people speak illumines a vast interconnectivity of history, culture, and politics.

The conversations about race and language have focused on studying the linguistic features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE; Wolfram, Hazen, & Tamburro, 1997; Wolfram, 1974); validating it as a viable communicative form of the English language (Smitherman, 1986); outlining how young people learn to speak AAVE (Van Hofwegan & Wolfram, 2010); expressing how race is talked about by local actors for the purpose of deracializing or coding discourse (Bertrand, 2010); and identifying the ways in which identity is created and maintained through the use of AAVE (Carter, 2013; Scanlon & Wassink, 2010). The literature addressing AAVE and racial inequality does not focus on the way in which the use of dialect within AAVE reveals critical issues of power and oppression. Scholars have not used dialect as a means of tracing historical oppression. Using principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a lens, this article outlines the way in which African...
American dialect as a discursive practice and communicative event gives insight into the socioeconomic, historical, cultural, and political context in which people and communities are situated. Using the city of Chicago as a case study, I demonstrate that Blacks in the largest city in the Midwest use a rural Southern style dialect in the speech performance of AAVE as a result of longstanding historical social isolation following the Great Migration. Ultimately, I demonstrate that dialect is a discursive practice that operates within a larger discourse about race and inequality in the United States.

This passing down of the Southern linguistic features, characterized by such features as “r-lessness” (Wolfram et al., 1997), demonstrates the fact that African American speech communities in Chicago have had few opportunities to interact with European American speech communities on a consistent basis. Indeed, Chicago consistently rates among America’s most racially segregated cities, coming in first in 2012 (“Chicago Most Segregated City in America,” 2012). The clear separation post-Jim Crow era caused by redlining, discrimination in education, and occupations has led to two cities: a White and Black Chicago. The presence of a Southern style of speaking amongst African Americans in Chicago reveals historical, cultural, and economic dimensions of our social reality. For this reason, dialect can be treated as a communicative event, a signpost of isolation. It can be used to track the process of inter-American migration and can be analyzed to track the history of inequality and segregation among a people (Wolfram et al., 1997).

It is pertinent that this research on AAVE be viewed in the light of African agency. This research does not seek to problematize Ebonics nor am I guided by a cultural deficit model of language. It is not that AAVE is created by pathology, disease, or oppression. However, AAVE is a sophisticated linguistic style defined by culture and Black agency. Notwithstanding, this article seeks to highlight what it means for a Southern style of AAVE speech to preponderate in a Northern city like Chicago.

**Background literature**

To understand dialect as a discursive practice that operates within a larger discourse about race and inequality, it is helpful to understand how Black rural Southern migrants were historically isolated from White and previously established Black speech communities. For this reason, I now turn to the African American Great Migration that occurred in two waves during the 20th century.

The Great Migration reorganized the American Northern cities by way of social, economic, demographic, and cultural changes. Two and a half million Blacks had left the South by 1950, and by 1980 that number was around 4 million. The Great Migration began after World War I when the U.S adoption of strict immigration policies forced Northern employers to consider Southern Blacks and Whites for inexpensive labor to replace the Southern and Eastern Europeans (Tolnay, 2003). Popular destination points were Chicago and Detroit in the Midwest, as well as New York and Philadelphia in the East; by 1930, 50% of all Black migrants were located in these areas (Curtis-White, Crowder, Tolnay & Adelman, 2005).
Although Blacks in the first wave migration to the North, from 1910 to 1940, were successful in occupations and got along reasonably well with Whites, although discrimination still persisted, the second wave migration from 1940 to 1970 ushered in many more African Americans from the rural south. These Blacks made not only Whites uncomfortable with the rapid shifting demographic, but also made longtime Northern-born Black residents uneasy about the sudden African influx. Some established Blacks resented how they were being viewed as a result of the new migrants. Blacks and Whites that had been living in major cities like Chicago for decades were worrisome about the way these new “lazy,” “ignorant,” and “volatile” Negroes might cause a rift in the otherwise tranquil relationships already established by Blacks and Whites (Curtis-White et al, 2005). Class segregation between Northern-born African Americans and Southern-migrated African Americans emerged in Chicago and elsewhere (Gates, 2004; Tolnay, 2003). The Black flight into White neighborhoods and the refusal to foster social connections was an effort by Northern-born Blacks to distance themselves from “Niggers” (Tolnay, 2003, p. 218).

In 1940, at the start of the second wave of migration, Northern Whites intensified efforts to restrict housing and job opportunities to Blacks. As a result, racial segregation was higher at the end of the Great Migration, post-civil rights legislation, than it was at the beginning in 1910 (Tolnay, 2003). To handle the boom of Blacks and to keep low-wage jobs from being filled and expanded, Blacks were forced by Whites into unemployment via discriminatory measures (Tolnay, 2003). After WWII, highways expanded and suburban housing became affordable for Whites due to new modifications from the FHA. Whites fled the cities for suburban bliss. The mass exodus away from the city switched the tax base. Property tax revenues funded suburban schools, whereas the urban schools deteriorated (Tolnay, 2003). The Great Migration and its subsequent ramifications set the stage for the separate and segregated climate that still persists in cities like Chicago 50 years after the passage of civil rights legislation.

AAVE

AAVE has been studied widely in the field of linguistics and communications. AAVE has long been argued as a viable and intelligent form of English (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Smitherman (1986) argued that AAVE is a mix of West African syntax and structure in conjunction with English words. Thus, since a “th” sound never appears in West African languages, AAVE replaces the “th” sound in many words with a “d” sound. Them becomes dem, and they becomes dey (Smitherman, 1986, p. 17). What is most important to this study from the literature on AAVE is the fluidity of language and its ability to be influenced by the dominant model of American English spoken by Whites, typically called Standard American English (SAE). Because speech patterns can be difficult to modify, they are prime ways to segregate and keep people from access to resources. Thus, employees can be denied jobs because of the way they speak (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) and students can be denied
degrees because they have trouble writing in the Standard English (Smitherman, 1986).

In addition, scholars have long identified the connection between language and oppression. It is a marker of privilege to define a subordinate group and deem how that group ought to be treated in society (Bosmajian, 1983; Smitherman, 1986). The oppressive authoritarian must psychologically express resentment and suspicions for ego gratification, and the oppressive authoritarian then suggests that “all will be well if the sub-humans or non-humans are segregated or eradicated” (Bosmajian, 1983, p. 142). This is the power language has as a cultural process in creating social isolation. Language affects the way we think about the other and words have the power to justify inhumanity and marginalization, whether against German Jews or American Blacks (Bosmajian, 1983). It is no loose assumption, then, to assert that the language of oppression can create both separate racial and speech communities where separate and distinct dialects can flourish, undiminished with time. Dialect styles in such communities can, in no small way, reveal the legacy of oppression that sustained them.

Turning to dialect, specifically, Van Hofwegan and Wolfram (2010) argued that the social factors that influence AAVE and dialect are: mother’s level of education, the number and quality of contacts with African Americans, the number and quality of contacts with White friends, the racial diversity of the school attended, age and grade, and gender (Van Hofwegan & Wolfram, 2010, p. 446). As such, Black children who go to integrated schools are more likely to have a parental legacy of higher education, interact with White friends, and are more likely to speak SAE more confidently and willingly.

Speaking style is influenced by identification with other speech users and by proximity (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). In addition, Blacks are more likely to speak SAE if their jobs depend on it (Rickford & Price, 2013). Individuals have an option to adopt dominant linguistic forms when they are in the vicinity of dominant linguistic producers. Being near linguistic producers in a community is to share a community’s resources. For Black students that never enter into the vicinity of dominant White linguistic producers, this can mean limited access to resources like adequately funded schools that tend to characterize all-White communities. As a result, linguistic isolation often means social and economic isolation.

Dialect is influenced by isolation. A lone African American family lived isolated off the Southeastern shore of the United States on Ocracoke Island. Although the Black family showed some verbal markers used in the White community on the island, the White Americans in the Outer Banks demonstrated no usage of AAVE, revealing the predominant exclusion of Black speakers by White islanders despite life-long residency in the same community (Wolfram et al., 1997). At the time of the civil war, 100 Blacks lived in Ocracoke. The Black children of the lone family were excluded from attending school during normal hours because of segregation laws. They were also excluded from social events, having to watch dances and festivities from outside of venues (Wolfram et al., 1997). With such a history, AAVE should have eroded over time as blending with the dominant Ocracoke dialect occurred.
This did not happen. Social isolation prevented this adoption (Wolfram et al., 1997, p. 31). This case demonstrates that social isolation can be reflected in language and that AAVE can be passed down through generations alongside the dominant language form. When people do not have the opportunity to interact, however, they retain the version of speaking that mostly reflects that spoken by prior generations. For a Northern city like Chicago, this means that the presence of the Southern style of speaking is likely a function of social seclusion maintained generation after generation since the second wave of the Great Black Migration to the North in the 1940s.

**The rural southern style of speaking AAVE**

I now turn to specific examples of the AAVE rural Southern dialect to characterize it. One element of AAVE rural Southern dialect is in the tendency to resyllabify the sound “ay” before laterals. Thus, the word *tell* sounds like *tayl*. The word *bell* sounds like *bayl* (Wolfram et al., 1997, p. 20). In addition, AAVE at large, but particularly in the rural South, is r-less. Thus, the word *sir* becomes *suh*, and the word *lord* is phonetically pronounced *lawd* (Wolfram et al., 1997, p. 17). Black Southern speech is influenced by the Creole Gullah form. Nichols (1983) saw that rural Southern Blacks used the sound “ee” to articulate words like *it*; that is, “Say ee couldn’t be” (1983, p. 206). Also, there is a drop out of the “th” sound as is characteristic of AAVE across the United States; however, rather than replace with a “d” as in *dem*, often times, no replacement is given. Indeed, “um” is used to denote items in object position. Thus, the sentence, “I put ‘um [them] on” is clearly understood (Nichols, 1983, p. 210).

The rural Southern dialect also uses an/ai/ ungliding phrase that substitutes the phone “iy” with “ai” in open syllables (Wolfram, 2003, p. 26). Thus, words like *time* become *taim* and words like *why* become *wah*. The list of rural Southern indicators given here are not exhaustive but are a few markers that identify the Chicago African American dialect as particularly and uniquely Southern in origin and usage.

Chicago AAVE speakers are different from Detroit, Los Angeles, or Cincinnati AAVE speakers due to the usage of rural Southern indicators like the resyllabification of the sound “ay” before laterals, /ai/ ungliding phrases, and rlessness. Though speakers in Detroit and LA are AAVE speech users, these speakers do not use many of the rural Southern indicators, and thus, do not rely on the rural Southern style of AAVE in every day speech. The goal of this article is not to problematize the rural Southern style of AAVE, only to identify, through language, the historical changes and challenges African American people have faced. I infer that the rural Southern style of AAVE does not exist in Chicago simply because of utility or Black agency, but that it thrives because of the way in which Blacks have been maintained as isolated speech communities. In addition, I argue that Black individuals born outside of these isolated communities or who have had significant contact with other speech communities are unlikely to speak with the same rural Southern dialect as a greater reliance on SAE is historically correlated with social mobility.
and economic opportunity. Many Black Chicagoans occupy low income neighborhoods and have faced stark separation from Chicago’s multiplicity, including the more affluent Blacks. This paper seeks to understand these low-income communities and individuals.

**Chicago segregation**

The dialect usage of Chicago Blacks corresponds to a historical record of segregation. It is little wonder why Martin Luther King Jr. called Chicago America’s most racist Northern city. The term *hyper-segregation* was invented to describe the ghettoized separation of Blacks on the Chicago South side (“Chicago Segregation Continues,” 2010). Looking at Chicago Census Data, the climate of segregation is startling. In 1960, 69% of Blacks lived in communities that were 94% Black; by 2011, 63% of Blacks lived in communities that were 95% Black (Bogira, 2013; Local Community Fact Book, 1963; Social IMPACT Research Center, 2013). The poverty rate for Blacks in 1960 was 29.7% for Blacks and 7.4% for Whites. In 2011, 34.1% of Blacks were poor in Chicago, whereas White poverty inched to 10.9% (Bogira, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 1960, Black families earned an average annual salary of $4,800, compared with $7,700 for White families. By 2010, Black families brought in about $29,371 and White families earned about $58,752 annually (Bogira, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 1960, 2010).

These data demonstrate the civil rights era legislation did very little to alleviate the gap between Whites and Blacks in terms of residential and economic segregation and stratification. African American children raised after the civil rights era were more likely to be raised in troubled neighborhoods than White children (Sharkey, 2013). In 2012, only 9% of Chicago Public School children were White students, whereas 44% were Hispanic, 42% were Blacks, and 87% were from low-income families (Bogira, 2013). In 2013, 86% of Blacks attended schools that were 90% Black (Bogira, 2013). These data reflect severe and high isolation of African Americans and their communities. The separatist and segregation efforts of Whites during and the Black Great migration continue on and compound residual effects for Blacks in Chicago, today.

The rural Southern dialect is possible to retain in a large Midwestern city like Chicago as long as communities are insulated. Sixty-three percent of Chicago Blacks live in 22 community areas: 18 on the South side and 4 on the West side (Bogira, 2013). Rogers Park is Chicago’s most diverse community with 39% of Whites, 26% Blacks, 24% Latinos, and 6% Asians. Other diverse neighborhoods include Hyde Park, West Ridge, Near West Side, and Bridgeport. These neighborhoods do not follow the general trend of segregation. However, there are 20 neighborhoods where Blacks make up more than 90% of the population. No other racial group has such homogenous numbers (Swerdlow, 2014). For places like Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood where 90% of the community is African American and 43% live in poverty, and where the homicide rate is three times the rest of the city, the effects of segregation and urban decay are palpable.
This kind of isolation seen in Chicago leaves African Americans and White Americans without the opportunity to interact. Notably, however, the lack of interaction affects these groups unevenly, where Blacks feel the social sting of institutional inequity and historical oppression the most. Modern segregation in the United States is not the same everywhere. In Seattle’s Yesler Terrace, although racism exists, multicultural and multiethnic backgrounds have conglomerated in such a way that the AAVE used by Blacks acts as a way to establish identity within an interwoven environment (Scanlon & Wassink, 2010). Without a legacy of segregation, in public spaces like the school, Seattle Blacks have a dialect that relies less on the rural Southern style and maintains greater overlap with White Seattle Speakers (Scanlon & Wassink, 2010).

Methods

I used a CDA to structure this study. The CDA concerns itself with relations of power and inequality in language (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDA studies real and extended instances of social interaction that take on linguistic form, asserting that language is created socially and programmed socially. Further, discourse is an opaque power object in modern societies that CDA seeks to make explicit. The purpose of CDA is to analyze hidden and transparent structural relationships of oppression, control, and power as manifested in language (Wodak, 2011). Discourse shapes economic, social, and cultural changes (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Muralikrishnan, 2011). From Fairclough's description of CDA (1992), I articulate how discourse as social practice sheds light on struggles over control, normativity, and resistance. However, for the purposes of this article I do not treat conversation as the primary means of investigation, nor am I exclusively interested in life histories. Rather, this article infers that “talking is performing acts according to rules” (Searle, 1969, p. 22). With the result that people perform oppression with talk. In other words, I am interested in articulating how dialect tells a story about life in Chicago for marginalized Blacks. Here, dialect reveals a narrative that indicates not only a person’s socioeconomic background, but also gives insight into social behaviors that created the conditions for modern segregation in Chicago. Unlike other analysis using CDA (Slavickova & Zvagulis, 2014), this article does not use CDA in a rigid format, compiling charts to come to a final goal or conclusion. Instead, I use the ideas of CDA to link dialect with social inequality, using Chicago as a case study. The CDA principles are (a) discourse is inherently historically connected and (b) social inequality can be exposed through language (Muralikrishnan, 2011).

To gather data regarding Chicago style African American English, I interviewed 10 individuals, nine of which were community college students, ranging from 20 to 45 in age, who had each been raised in Chicago and one of which was a middle-aged Chicago Public School employee raised on the South side. Nine of these participants were former students enrolled at two community colleges located in Chicago’s West side and downtown. All informants were free to decline participation. This
population was chosen because all of the informants identified themselves as African Americans and were raised in Chicago from across multiple socioeconomic backgrounds. This contrast was important because it allowed me to see the difference between marginalized Blacks and adequately advantaged Blacks. This population was uniquely positioned to help me investigate historical oppression. Each informant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. These semistructured interviews happened individually and lasted for about 15 min. Each informant was given a week to interview elders and family members to complete the following questions: (a) When did your family arrive in Chicago and from where did they come? (b) What was life like for your family when they first arrived in Chicago? (c) What is life like for your family today? (d) Have you lived on Chicago’s South or West sides? (e) Growing up, did you have friends of a different race than you? (f) Describe the socioeconomic status of the people in the neighborhood where you grew up.

Because semistructured interviews were conducted, a series of questions beyond the initial six were asked to ascertain a more complete story of life in Chicago for American Blacks. These subsequent questions were concerned with the predominance of SAE or AAVE in the community in which speakers were raised, talking “White,” the Black experience with racism in Chicago, and parental occupations. These questions provided me with insight into not only the conditions in which the rural dialect flourishes, but also with specific rural speech patterns and the migration patterns that brought these speaking styles to Chicago.

The ten informants used in this paper constitute a small case-study of Chicago’s diverse African American speech communities. My informants demonstrate the correlation between African Americans, isolation, and the prominence of rural Southern Ebonics. In addition, these interviews demonstrate that when African Americans interact with diversified communities, the rural Southern style of AAVE is utilized less frequently in every day speech.

Results and analysis

The following section examines dialect usage using two important principles of CDA. The two salient principles of CDA utilized are (a) discourse is historically rooted and (b) that social inequality can be tracked via language. This section aims to show that dialect is a discursive practice that operates within a larger discourse about race and inequality, telling a story of Black rural Southern migration and segregation. This section also seeks to show that a diverse array of speech patterns exists amongst African Americans in Chicago. However, the most marginalized individuals use rural Southern speech patterns the most. This section achieves this by showing that specific language markers characteristic of Black Southern talk: r-lessness, “ee” sounds that replace “i” vowels, and the /ai/ unglided that changes words like my to mah, as well as the tendency to re-syllabify the sound- “ay” before laterals, persists in Chicago due to historical separation. The following section is organized by question/topic. I have used specific responses of individual informants to transmit the most salient points.
From where did your family arrive?

Michael: Mah family is from Mo'head Mississipi. Dey moved from Sunflowa, Mississipi, befo' comin' to Chicago.

All informants described migration from Southern states like Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas to Chicago during the 1940s and 1970s, mostly during the second wave of the Great Migration.

How was life for your family when they first arrived in Chicago?

Aria: Life for mah family was hah-d (hard). Dey struggled with alcohah abuse. Dey had a lotta houses and vacant lots ova dah (there).

Aria, Michael, and John identified life in Chicago for their families as a struggle, rattled with poverty and covert racism, where public shame replaced the public lynching their ancestors fled from in the American South.

How would you define the socioeconomic status of the majority of the people in your neighborhood where you grew up?

John: Poah (Poor). Ah don’t know if dis is an accurate assumption, but if you poah (poor), ay-body got free lunches. So dah was like one person in da schoo’ who had tah pay and he only had tah pay like fi-teen (fifteen) cents.

Aria, John, and Michael described beginning their lives in impoverished circumstances on either the cities South or West sides, where the Southern style of AAVE predominates. The families of these informants never escaped these circumstances. Their accent was thick with the rural Southern AAVE style of speaking over others who grew up in speech communities that relied less on the rural Southern dialect and for those who went to schools where other students relied less on the rural Southern dialect.

Have you ever lived in Chicago’s South or West sides?

Erica: My family lives, majority on da South sides. But when I was 15, I moved to Hopkins Park, Illinois.

What were the demographics of your new residence at 15?

Erica: It was a mixture [of races]. I grew up with Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks. It was more middle class.

Erica, Michelle, Lisa, and Joseline are informants that do not consistently use the rural Southern dialect in their typical speech patterns.
What were the economic conditions like where you grew up? Did you live on Chicago’s West side your whole life?

Michelle: Just until I was sixteen, den I moved to Maywood. It was nice at dat time. It was more suburban life. It wasn't as impoverished.

In Maywood, did the Black folks have a White style of speaking?

Michelle: I would have to say so. Somewhat. My cousin talked da same way.

Michelle and Erica and their families did not experience steady state poverty and isolation like Michael, John, and Aria. Though Michelle and Erica’s style of speech is characteristic of AAVE, utilizing a “d” in place of “th” sounds, it is not characteristic of rural Southern AAVE as r-lessness, /ai/ unglided and the /ay/ after laterals are missing from their speech patterns. This change is due to the comingling of speech communities outside of Chicago’s South and West side communities and the exchange of linguistic features with the dominant SAE model. Erica’s experience in the diverse Hopkins Park community and Michelle’s experience in Maywood situated these individuals in alternate language contexts outside of Chicago’s South and West sides.

How do you change your speech patterns when you are with friends?


Does everyone in your family speak in the same way as you?

Joseline: No, they call me little White-Black girl. I strategically practiced to talk this way. Because I am not who people define me as. I could talk like: “Fasho, when ah was growin’ up ah had a lot fraynds (friends) dat was different den you.” I don't say, “dint (didn't) you look at da news on Channel sayven (seven)?” I don’t talk like that anymore. When I was in New York, they used to say I talked country.

Participants like Lisa and Joseline demonstrated the ability to code-switch between SAE and the rural Southern style of AAVE. As individuals raised in Chicago’s South and West sides, respectively, they were raised around the rural Southern AAVE and Lisa continues to use it in informal circumstances. However, both have adopted SAE for their professional style of talk. Lisa’s family arrived in Chicago in 1948, hailing from Arkansas; Joseline’s family in 1945 from Mississippi. Joseline intentionally practiced and adopted SAE during her years in community college as she believed it to be “better.” Lisa began to appropriate SAE in grammar school, as was required of “good” students. Lisa was also accepted into a public charter school and bussed out of her Auburn Gresham community for high school every
day, placing her away from her physical and speech communities of origin. However, Lisa occasionally included rural Southern AAVE with her professional style. Below, notice the resyllabification of the sound “ay” before the lateral that transforms the word *basketball* into *baysketbah* and the /ai/ ungliding phrase that substitutes the phone “iy” with “ai” that transforms *sometimes* into *sometaims*.

**Is there poverty in the area where you grew up?**

Lisa: Its about 30% … Dey ratha stand on da street instead of wak (walk) down the street to actually find a job … We’ve had like people come to help. We have like Joaquin Noah, he comes around. They have like dis baysketbah game every year. Its an option to choose to be a certain way sometaims.

Erica, Michelle, Lisa and Joseline were born into traditionally marginalized communities where the rural Southern style of AAVE is dominant. For Joseline, a special attempt to modify her speech behavior accounted for the relative absence of the rural Southern dialect during our conversation, for others, the decreased contact with communities that relied more on the rural Southern style of AAVE accounted for the reasons these speakers rarely and/or inconsistently indexed the rural Southern style of AAVE. These speakers demonstrated that when individuals do not have exclusive contact with the rural Southern style of AAVE, as is true with any language style, they relied on the rural Southern style of AAVE less frequently.

Two informants, Vinny and Roshelle, are Chicago African Americans that do not demonstrate the rural AAVE in their speech styles in any degree. Raised in Homewood Flossmore and Rogers Park, respectively, Roshelle and Vinny represent African Americans raised in economically comfortable neighborhoods.

**How would you define the socioeconomic status of the people in your neighborhood?**

Roshelle: At the time, it was a very affluent area. So most of the people lived in the middle class or upper middle class. We had some celebrities like Buddy Guy that lived out there. I know his kids. There was a lot of old money where I grew up. I didn’t always just see Black kids, I grew up with everybody. My mom was a Nurse, she lives in Calumet today.

Vinny: I would say low-middle, middle, and even some upper middle class families lived where I lived.

Vinny and Roshelle were most likely to have friends of a different racial background because they lived in the least segregated communities in Chicago. Every other participant, except Erica and Michelle, identified their childhood friendships as consisting of mostly African Americans. Roshelle and Vinny also demonstrated the least amount of contact and usage of rural Southern AAVE in their speech patterns and the least amount of consistent contact with Chicago’s South and West sides.
Did you have a lot of friends of a different race?

Roshelle: Yes. For me, I had White, Indian, Mexican … I had everything compared with my cousins that grew up in the city and only had Black friends.

Vinny: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Plenty. Asian. Latino. Black. White. Everybody went to my school, Eugene Field …. The North side consisted of just about every race you can think of. That was the norm for me. The environment was pretty much healthy.

Roshelle and Vinny’s families migrated from the South in 1960 and 1975, respectively. However, they were not strictly from the rural South. Vinny’s father had a bachelor’s degree before moving to Chicago and quickly found employment. Roshelle’s family was led by a man from the urban South who quickly found employment in 1960s Chicago. These families did not suffer the same levels of economic destitution or social isolation as Blacks who moved from the rural South and who still reside in Chicago’s impoverished West and Southside communities, thus, their speech styles share the least overlap with the rural Southern style of AAVE.

Nania is a Chicago Public School employee and former teacher. Nania represents a population that was raised around a mixture of rural AAVE and SAE. Her parents represent a unique group from the rural South that was able to secure steady employment and a position in the Black middle class without having formal education. Although Nania exemplifies the SAE style of speech, she has also identified her mother’s usage of the rural Southern AAVE.

Have you ever been accused of talking White?

Nania: Yes. My mother has that southern dialect and my son has it because he spends most of his time around her because I am working. They say, “doah” instead of “door.” “Finna” instead of “Going to.” I think I have it at times … I mean, I grew up in that. My mother and I might say stuff like, “dhere’s a fah (fire)”.

Nania was sent to Catholic Schools accessible only by personal transportation and costing several thousand dollars a year. Her private school education was the place where Nania began to identify with SAE, especially when used by teachers. Most families that migrated from the rural South would have found this impossible as employment for most was difficult to secure. Nania’s family was an exception. Nania’s family was fortunate as her grandfather was given a job by a close family member upon arrival in Chicago.

Unlike Nania, families without automotive transportation and capital to afford private school education are more likely to remain in isolated communities. There is a connection between the rural Southern dialect and institutional marginalization. Those Chicagoans who rely most heavily on the rural Southern style of AAVE in everyday speech are also most likely to be raised in impoverished conditions, separate from other speech communities.
Discussion

The critical question about discourse, informed by CDA, that I ask is: How does the rural Southern dialect predominate amongst the Black Chicago poor and what does this mean about power and oppression in Chicago? African Americans share a history of redlining, job discrimination, and have been subjected to a tax base that underfunds inner city schools across the nation. What makes Chicago different is the degree to which this isolation has pervaded neighborhoods and institutions.

Applying principles of CDA to a Chicago context, chiefly that (a) discourse is historically rooted and (b) language can reveal social inequality. These informants, in aggregate, have revealed a correlation between dialect usage, rural migration from the American South, and extreme prejudice. Segregating pressures like public criticism, low wage labor, and the desire to find other individuals with a common identity and common community funneled Southern African American migrants and their descendants into racially isolated communities where the rural Southern dialect was maintained and proliferated because of limited contact with any other linguistic style.

Informants that spent their lives exclusively in poor Black neighborhoods like Michael, Aria, and John demonstrated a higher frequency of the use of r-lessness (Wolfram et al., 1997), the /ai/ unglided use (Wolfram, 2003), and the /ay/ before laterals (Wolfram et al., 1997). Each of these are indicators of a dialect passed down from rural Southerners following the Great Migration from 1940 to 1970 (Tolany, 2003; Gates, 2004). Stigmatized as lazy and volatile, securing resources like employment, housing, and education would have been difficult for early migrants. By contrast, informants that experienced greater wealth and diversity like Vinny, Erica, and Roshelle, relied much less on these features. These participants had greater access to wealth and more interracial friendships than those Chicago Blacks that never left their impoverished neighborhoods. Individuals that were born in communities where the rural Southern style of AAVE was used but that had access to SAE speech communities via educational facilities or by moving from the city altogether like Lisa, Nania, Michelle, and Joseline also came to rely less on the rural Southern style of speech in everyday talk. All of these individuals, excluding Michelle, were most likely to code-switch between SAE and the rural Southern style of AAVE during informal conversations.

For Chicago, the highly populated usage of the rural Southern dialect suggests that entire speech communities have faced intense segregation and separation efforts. This correlates with the Chicago demographic data, where the city’s neighborhoods are racially defined and maintained (Bogira, 2013). Dialect itself, here, is the discursive practice that yields insight into the historical struggle with segregation that continues today. In other words, Black Chicagoans are telling this story when they speak, both in their conversations and in the dialect with which they speak. When people speak, they tell a story that is inherently cultural and political. The story of social isolation in African American communities in Chicago in terms of schools, housing, income inequality, and occupations has led to a tale of two
cities. One, a rich, bustling, vibrant city, a jewel in the eyes of millions of tourists. The other, a city that has always been inaccessible where underfunded and overcrowded schools predominate, where violence and crime are hallmarks, and where destitution and separation seem natural. This segregation, that is anything but new, has been captured in a place few have considered to look: the voices of the Black voiceless. When humans communicate, their voices carry within them the actions of long-passed actors, revealing a history beyond the personal narrator (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2000).

Chicago’s spatial and social seclusion creates a gap that language makes visible and explicit. Dialect analysis reveals that the Black struggle against oppression rages unabated as entire subsections of Chicago are left institutionally alone and underfunded. The dilapidated conditions in the Chicago poor and Black communities have received very little redress 50 years after the dawn of the Civil Rights movement. The racial isolation is long-standing and largely unmitigated. It is easy to fall prey to the belief that racism will dissolve with time as Americans move further away from the Jim Crow era. However, this notion misses the reason why racism continues to propagate. Racism survives not because of bigotry somewhere in the American South or because of pugnacious police officers, rather, racism survives in America because it is still useful. By isolating and marginalizing a sub-set of a city’s citizens, more resources can be allocated and reserved for those deemed most “deserving.” Chicago food deserts, underfunded schools, high crime rates, and inferior housing are not to be found amongst White residents, instead, these issues disproportionately plague the Black poor.

Conclusions and future research

Rather than merely speak of the bias against AAVE dialect users by dominant SAE speakers or the oppressive measures implemented against a person when they do not speak the “right way,” this article has sought to understand dialect as a pointer, an indexer that ties flesh and blood speakers to a series of past social processes. Dialect is one artifact in the ongoing story of social interaction. Just as fossilized flora and fauna serve as evidence for the biological legacy of life on Earth, language and dialect serve as evidence for the social legacy of human behavior- past and present.

Analyzing Chicago African American dialect as a discursive practice that operates within a larger discourse about race and inequality allows for scholars to uncover the ways in which dialect is historically connected to oppression. Few Communications scholars have treated dialect as a means of understanding, documenting, and tracing historical oppression and power relations. In addition, although research in migration continues to focus on transmigrants from Latin America and Europe, we can continue to learn from the Great intra-American migrations of old that define the destiny of so many. To be clear, the analysis used in this article is not intended to degrade or suggest something is wrong with the rural Southern style of AAVE. This article is also not intended to deduce the meaning of particular statements, nor has this article aimed to present new formulations about specific dialectal
features; however this article is intended to examine dialect as a politicized discursive practice, an authentic communicative event that relates to power, migration, and historical oppression.

It is also important to note what this article presents about AAVE more broadly. AAVE is key to understanding American society and the cultural processes within it. AAVE is adaptable and enduring. Like all language styles, it is sensitive to outside influences and can blend just as its speakers blend with other groups. The way AAVE is spoken is just as much an indicator of identity and class as it is an indicator of isolation and restricted access. To understand AAVE is to move closer to understanding the American historical process and its consequences for today's citizens.

For future research, scholars should look to how styles of speech, found in an analysis of verbal systems like dialect, inform patterns of migration, power, historical oppression, and the struggle for equity. Regional differences can yield insights into how people have adapted within power relations. Using CDA as a lens, talk can be investigated beyond content-analysis. Investigating dialect as discursive practice that operates within a larger discourse about race and inequality reminds us that discourse is historical, where the actors and the actions are situated in an interconnected web of power and resistance. Thus, the residual effects of migration patterns started 100 years ago, as seen in the Great Migration, continue to ripple and impact the lives of individuals and communities today. Communication scholars should investigate the way dialect tracks historical processes, indexes political practices, and reveals the cultural development of oppression.

References


