A Thesis

entitled

University of Toledo Students’ Reactions to African American Vernacular English: Do Phonological Features Matter?

by

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This thesis study was a replication of Rodriguez et al. (2004) research that explored listeners’ perceptions of the attractiveness of speakers with varying degrees of AAVE phonological features. Six females were selected who exhibit varying degrees of AAVE (two “strong” AAVE speakers, two “moderate” AAVE speakers, and two SAE speakers). All speakers recorded a brief definition of achievement motivation. Subsequently, one-hundred and two participants rated the six speakers based on their perceptions of status (intelligence, wealth, class, and education) and attractiveness (kindness, sweetness, likability, and friendliness). Results indicated that speakers who exhibit SAE were more favorably evaluated than speakers who exhibit AAVE. These findings demonstrated that speakers' accents affected listeners' judgments about them.
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Chapter One

Beyond Words

Introduction

Throughout history, there have been several dialects that have formed across this country, and these dialects persist because of their users. For example, there are regional dialects, such as northern, southern, or mid-western, and ethnic dialects, such as Hispanic English and Chinese English. Equally important, in 1973, Williams coined the term Ebonics (a blend of the terms ebony- denoting skin tone and phonics- referring to speech) to describe the dialect of speech and writing style of many African Americans. Since then, this speech has shifted to the current politically correct name: African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is a dialect of Standard American English (SAE). AAVE continues to be a controversial topic that has been highly debated in various dialect studies in the field of sociolinguistics for years. Since AAVE became recognized by linguists, it still remains perceived by many as a sub-standard dialect. McWhorter (1998) set out to demystify any unclear notions about AAVE not being a recognizable dialect, in which he argues that AAVE is a sophisticated dialect in its own right. Simply, like any other dialect, it has its own slang; however, AAVE is not a dialect of slang or bad English. There is a great difference between slang and this dialect variation. AAVE should not be shunned, but instead it is critical to examine its linguistic structure.

AAVE has been depicted in many popular works of literature. For instance, through anthropological work, Zora Neale Hurston was able to rely upon folk culture, and AAVE was a reflection of her work. In Hurston’s (1937) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she writes, “Ah I ain’t never seen mah papa. And Ah didn’t know ‘im if Ah I did. Mah mama neither. She
was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough to know. Mah grandma raised me” (4). Hurston uses this dialect through her characters to connect with readers and provides linguistic insight to those who may not be familiar with everyday speech of this language community. These particular readers are non-blacks who may live, work, or go to school within or outside the black community. Readers are able to learn about new colloquialisms and, perhaps, gain a greater understanding that AAVE is meaningful and intellectual. AAVE remains important because speakers of this dialect have been able to hold on to this significant linguistic form of expression. Readers could grasp that AAVE does have a communicative function among its users. Additionally, AAVE as a dialect has its own phonology, syntax, and semantics. This dialect does, in fact, serve and has a purpose among its users.

Not only does AAVE have cultural value in acclaimed works of writing, it also has significance in various genres of music, such as gospel, rhythm and blues (R&B), and hip hop. In particular, through the preaching of gospel, Zeigler (2001), a sociocultural linguist, explains that shout’n is a form of speech and a marker in AAVE. *Shout’n* is a religious term used to describe what takes place in many African American churches. There are two forms of *shout’n*. The first takes place during a preacher’s sermon in which a member or members of the congregation may rejoice with gladness, by *shout’n amen, thank you, hallelujah, praise God, well, come on*, and so forth. The second form of *shout’n* is considered to be a personal session with God, where his spirit *falls* on an individual and can be expressed through movement or dance. Zeigler (2011) proclaims that *shout’n* has been a mode of expression among some African Americans that can be traced back to religious ‘ring dances’ in Africa. Although *shout’n* can be conveyed as a form of speech, it is also expressed non-
verbally. While a person’s *shouting* can be viewed as personal, it can also be viewed as performative in the church. Members may not always verbally express how they are feeling but instead express themselves non-verbally through an interpretive dance. Similar to this performativity in church, plantation dances, jubas, were once performed by slaves as a form of entertainment for one another. There is a connection between previous plantation dances and current shout’n in the modern black church today.

AAVE can be observed in other ways than in literature and music. Specifically, AAVE is commonly exhibited through speech, and many researchers have studied this dialect, which brings focus to this current thesis study. This study is a replication of research conducted by Rodriguez, Cargile, and Rich (2004). The purpose of their study was to explore the relationship between the strength of speaker accent and judgments by listeners about each speaker. The researchers recorded various speakers in natural settings, and they were then matched according to the best accent condition they represented. Rodriguez et al., (2004) evaluated the speakers’ speech according to the number of AAVE phonological features present. The identification of the phonological features provided a reliable method of determining the different levels of AAVE. Of all the speakers analyzed, six females were selected who exhibit varying degrees of AAVE (two “strong” AAVE speakers, two “moderate” AAVE speakers, and two MUSE, Mainstream United States English, speakers.) AAVE features include final cluster reduction, which commonly pertains to /t/ and /d/, and post-vocalic ‘r’ as identified by Bailey and Thomas (1998) and Richford (1999). The first speaker read aloud, in a controlled experiment, with eleven phonological features of AAVE. The second speaker read the text with twelve phonological features of AAVE. For example, “achievement” was pronounced “achievemen.” Next, speakers who exhibit “moderate”
AAVE had seven phonological features present while reading. For instance, speakers read “the” as “de.” Finally, the last two speakers demonstrated no characterizations of AAVE while reading the text.

After selecting these speakers, Rodriguez et al. (2004) recorded the speakers reading brief definition of the term “achievement motivation.” Two-hundred and eighty-two men and women were randomly selected as listeners to participate. The participants listened to and evaluated the six pre-recorded audiotapes. Listeners evaluated the speakers based on their perception of status (intelligent or unintelligent, rich or poor, upper or lower class, and educated or uneducated) and attractiveness (kind-unkind, sweet-sour, likable-unlikable, and friendly-unfriendly.) The listeners had less than two seconds to evaluate the speakers by selecting a score on a Likert scale. The results indicate that speaker accent had a significant impact on the evaluation of status and attractiveness, and the findings showed that participants rated the MUSE speakers as more attractive than the moderate AAVE speakers and moderate speakers as more attractive than the strong AAVE speakers. Likewise, the participants rated MUSE speakers as more status-possessing than the moderate AAVE speakers and the moderate AAVE speakers as more status-possessing than the strong AAVE speakers.

Despite the great attention that has been given to studies that focus on AAVE, there is still much to learn about attitudes toward it, both negative and positive. For numerous years, linguistic scholars have focused on the relationship between language attitudes and AAVE. Labov (1972) studied the linguistic function of AAVE and examined its communicative purposes. Additionally, Smitherman and Cunningham (1997) have argued
for the necessity of this nation to become better educated on AAVE. When people are well informed, then it can lead to progression in the ways of thinking about AAVE.

**History of AAVE**

A historical glance of the formation of AAVE is beneficial while trying to gain a better understanding of this dialect. African Americans have rich sociohistorical origins. Although there is a constant debate over the origin of structure and current phrases of AAVE, Wolfram (2002) has suggested this was due to regional and social varieties of English, earlier language contact situation, and independent innovation. Despite the great progress that has been made, reconstruction of earlier AAVE remains too complex. Consequently, this complexity is evident with the difficulties with getting data to study earlier forms of AAVE. When pertaining to written forms of AAVE, problems have occurred because writing is usually a formal version of a language and due to this, speech forms of AAVE may have been suppressed (Wolfram, 2002). Additionally because of poor recording quality, there was trouble with spoken language data.

Originally, slave masters purposely separated slaves, who spoke the same language. Stewart (1967), an AAVE linguistic scholar, notes that in an attempt to hinder conspiracy or revolt, slave masters separated Africans from the same tribe; as a result, the only language that the slaves on a given plantation had in common was the pidgin English they learned in Africa and in America. Moreover, this language expanded in grammar and vocabulary, creating a creole language that was adopted by this language community. This action had a significant impact on the lives of African Americans. Baugh (1999) points out how blacks were previously forced into physical isolation, thus contributing to linguistic isolation. During this time of isolation, African Americans depended on each other and therefore
fostered communication between one another. Baldwin (1979) further extends this claim of isolation, and states AAVE is the creation of the African diaspora, and “the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that Black English began to be formed.” Baldwin (1979) argues that AAVE was established in the church during an oppressive period in history.

**Language Attitudes**

Language attitudes research arose in the 1930s and continues to show how language is a dominating factor that has tremendous social influence (Rodriguez et al, 2004). Language attitudes interact with the suggested role of language in societies. For instance, in Reino’s (2001) Moroccan ethnographic study, she examined the social attitudes of languages in Morocco. She interviewed sixteen participants, and the majority of participants were Berbers, who displayed positive attitudes toward their own language. Contrary, three non-Berber interviewees revealed some neutral and negative attitudes toward the language. Despite these opposing views, they acknowledged Berber’s cultural heritage and importance in Morocco. In another language attitudes study, Williams and Bayard (2002) examined New Zealand listeners’ evaluations of New Zealand-, Australian-, Canadian-, and British- accented English. The researchers asked questions to evaluate perceptions of intelligence and likability. Their results showed the Australian-accented speaker was perceived more intelligent and most likable; however, the British-accented speaker was perceived as the least likable of all speakers. Additionally, Giles et al. (1995) conducted a study to measure listener’s affective responses to a speaker’s accent. Their research compared Caucasian- American reactions to standard and Hispanic- accented English speakers. The results
revealed that listening to Hispanic-accented speakers did not promote a negative bias or mood among Caucasian-American listeners.

When a person speaks, many times, he or she is unconsciously or consciously judged by others, often not by what he or she has to say but how he or she says it. For example, if a person speaks in a different dialect than another person, his or her speech may not go unnoticed. Individuals react to what they hear; however, people hold negative language biases and pass judgment. Thus, it is imperative to continue to examine language attitudes because of the various biases that exist and the strong ties that language has to social factors. These biases are prevalent through people’s perceptions about class, education, race, and gender of another person, and the way a person uses language is often scrutinized.

According to Rodriguez et al. (2004, p.407), language attitude specifically focuses on “the social consequences of any number of different language behaviors, such as speech style, speech rate, gender-linked language, or code-switching.” These authors suggest that speakers with non-standard accents are often rated differently when compared with standard speakers, even when evaluated by the same characteristics. Further, Ryan and Sebastian (1980) have noted that the use of non-standard and standard accents is usually associated with social class. They have found that when listeners find that a non-standard speaker is middle class, their assessment on measures of status are more satisfactory. Language attitudes research primarily uses speaker evaluations, and once more, we can gather data to use speaker evaluations as an investigative measure (Cargile, 2002). More importantly, speaker evaluations are valuable in this current study because they provide the opportunity for individuals to evaluate their perceptions of a standard and non-standard dialect in this country. AAVE does have a social value, and it will be examined by evaluators.
There are similar perceptions among standard versus non-standard dialects that reach beyond AAVE. Hibbert (2002) links Black South African English (BSAfE) to AAVE and claims that BSAfE has not been recognized for political and social reasons, which is comparable to the response of AAVE; BSAfE is a dialect of resistance, and this resistance occurred during apartheid (1948-1994). (Other major varieties of English spoken in South Africa include Afrikaans-English, South African English, and Southern African English.) Even though BSAfE has been considered a dialect of resistance, a very literate, educated minority speaks BSAfE, while AAVE is regarded to be spoken mainly by low socioeconomic status African Americans. Despite AAVE not being consistently labeled as a second dialect of SAE, its language system has been acknowledged by some linguists and educators but not by the society at large. Due to political reasons, Standard English, (SE) is currently being used in South African towns and schools because of its prominent status (Hibbert, 2002).

Comparatively, similarities can be drawn between BSAfE and AAVE in the educational system. In most cases, it is socially and educationally unacceptable to use a non-standard dialect. For example, in one Introduction to Linguistics course at a mid-western university, the majority of students expressed that although they were able to recognize “She done told you” as AAVE, they did not consider it to be a grammatical utterance. Many times, AAVE is shunned, and speakers cannot use a cultural dialect that is significant to them. In an attempt to explain the hurdles of BSAfE and AAVE speakers, Baugh (2004) states how whites are not forced to learn BSAfE or AAVE in school; however, many blacks must learn to use SAE. Furthermore, he suggests that it is not clear how linguistically successful a person can be if he or she is tied to a speech community that is vastly different from their own. This alludes to the political struggle that exists in academic contexts
regarding standard versus non-standard dialects. In this context, many educators will not talk about or respect AAVE as a dialect and also not recognize its grammar system in the classroom. Instructors’ non-recognition of AAVE is a reflection of their own negative perceptions or their limited knowledge of the dialect. Researchers and other members of the community need to take a closer look at perceptions of AAVE.

**Perceptions of AAVE**

Perceptions are how individuals interpret the world around them using their five senses: taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. Perceptions are an aspect of living, and different people have ways of developing them; however, these beliefs are likely to affect judgment. Although people have the ability to perceive, their perceptions are sometimes false and misleading. Misperceptions are common in this society, in which many individuals have misperceptions about certain people, cultures, and ideas.

Not surprisingly, there are various misunderstandings about AAVE and its speakers. Baugh (1999) suggests the continual use of racism and educational apartheid has helped contribute to the misconceptions of the dialect. Educational apartheid are strong words to describe the perpetuation of misperceptions that continue today that are groundless. Many common misconceptions about AAVE speakers suggest they are lazy, unintelligent, and poor (McWhorter, 1998) Although these are common misconceptions of speakers of AAVE, they are invalid.

However, assumptions may lead to surprising results. In a study investigating speech accents, Baugh (1999) asked 350 judges, who were students, to place each of the nine black and nine white speakers on a linguistic continuum between SAE and AAVE in addition to giving their impressions of race. The results show how the judges mistook six black speakers
as white speakers. Other findings indicate some instances where no consensus could be made by the judges to identify race. Thus, these results show that is highly unlikely to be able to accurately perceive speakers on a linguistic continuum between SAE and AAVE. This study differs from Cargile et al. (2002) and the current project in which the researchers acknowledge this linguistic range between SAE and AAVE and employ participants to evaluate speakers that represent these accent conditions.

Moreover, misperceptions of AAVE take place within its own linguistic community. The outcomes of these particular misperceptions have been observed intraracially. Doss and Gross’ (1994) research illustrates how one African American male spoke in SAE, AAVE, and code-switching (CS) and was evaluated solely by African American men and women on the basis of attractiveness and likability. Although these researchers hypothesized that the participants would rate the CS more favorably than the AAVE or SAE model, the results showed that the SAE model was rated more likable than the CS and AAVE model; additionally they found male participants to rate all models as more acceptable than female subjects did. This study highlights the use of SAE in the African American community. Specifically, the privileging of SAE exists because of the prominent status that it holds in this country.

Moving beyond intraracial perceptions, Billings’ (2005) research attempts to investigate attitudes about AAVE among blacks and whites. He asked high school and college students to evaluate six men (three whites who exhibited SAE and three blacks who exhibited both SAE and AAVE) through video-recorded clips. Billings (2005) found that blacks who exhibited SAE were rated higher, as more competent than whites. These results indicate that many perceptions of individuals can be based on misleading assumptions.
because perhaps individuals perceived that black speakers would speak AAVE, and then they reacted more positively when they heard blacks speak SAE.

Not only can assumptions lead to faulty perceptions, they can also lead to stereotypes. Stereotypes are beliefs about a group of people and are cognitive in nature (Cargile, 2002). While stereotypes about language have ties to social stereotypes, they are not in particular the same (Rodriguez et al., 2004). For example, Lambert (1967) and Robinson (1972), language attitude scholars, expressed how a speaker’s language may serve as a way to recall in the listener’s mind a given social category that is responsible for judgments about the speaker’s characteristics. Given, these social categories are created before speech is observed. Various social factors influence the make-up of such categories, which are based on race, class, and gender, and it seems inescapable to evade stereotypes about language and social stereotypes.

Perceptions of AAVE are not void of stereotypes. According to Cargile (2002), most often evaluations made by mainstream study participants, most often change when a speaker from a particular ethnic minority group switches from SAE to a non-standard dialect. Hearers, many times, react to such change by then evaluating them less favorably while using a non-standard dialect. The process of shifting when evaluating is critical to understand because it provides an understanding of why people are motivated to shift evaluations based on standard versus non-standard evaluations. Again, this shows that SAE has privilege in this nation. Additionally, there is a bias in language use when referring to standard versus non-standard. Language characterized as non-standard denotes a lack and, furthermore, is separated from commonly accepted dialects.
The Gap

There remains a need to research the perceptions of stronger non-standard accents and moderate non-standard accents. Before this original study was conducted (Rodriguez et al, 2004), this research area had not been examined. Therefore, Rodriguez et al. (2004) designed a research study to set out to answer one question: Will the strength of a speaker’s accent, determined by the number of phonological features of AAVE present, influence judgments that listeners make about them? This current thesis study plans to extend this same research question in a different context. This project explores listeners’ perceptions of the attractiveness of speakers with varying degrees of AAVE phonological features.
Chapter Two
Methodology

Methods

As a reminder to readers, this thesis study is a replication of Rodriguez, Cargile, and Rich's (2004) research. Previously, the effect of an AAVE speaker's accent had not been observed; so, this research was needed. The driving research question in their study was: Will the strength of a speaker's accent, determined by the number of phonological features of AAVE present, influence judgments that listeners make about them? Rodriguez et al. (2004) measured whether the use of strong AAVE, moderate AAVE, or Standard American English (SAE) impacted listeners’ judgments about the speakers.

In the original study, Rodriguez et al. (2004) used verbal guise technique to capture the spontaneous speech of the six speakers with comparable voice-qualities. The verbal guise technique allowed the researchers to test the speakers in disguise, in which they did not tell what they were looking for but simply recorded their answers. The researchers chose to record a variety of speakers naturally and selected those with similar voice qualities and rates of speech. Then, these speakers were matched according to the accent condition they best represented. This ultimately led to the selection of six speakers: four African American females supplied AAVE recordings and two Caucasian females provided the SAE recordings. Each of the six speakers read a brief definition of “achievement motivation.” Although it is difficult to select a “neutral” text, one that lacks evaluative implications, the original researchers decided to use a text that helped to perpetuate the academic environment that participants were already evaluating the speakers. In other words, the researchers found it practical to incorporate a definition explaining achievement motivation to college students.
Rodriguez et al., (2004) study took place at a large, urban, western university. Two-hundred and eighty-three participants (104 men and 178 women; 126 Caucasians, 75 Asian American 59, Hispanics, 17 African Americans and six other/declined to state) evaluated six speakers representing strong AAVE, moderate AAVE, and SAE. The results indicated that listeners rated speakers with strong AAVE accents less status-possessing and less attractive than speakers of moderate AAVE, and moderate AAVE speakers were evaluated less favorably than SAE speakers. These results were significant because it showed how AAVE was negatively perceived by participants, and in this thesis study, the researcher will explore if these past, negative perceptions of AAVE have changed.

This current thesis was conducted to see if speakers' accents would affect listeners' judgments about them. The research was carried out at a medium-sized, mid-western university during the spring semester of 2011. The school’s enrollment population is approximately 23,000 students. Also, this university is a four-year public institution. The demographics of this school are diverse, and there are various ethnicities and nationalities that make up the student population. The student population is approximately made up of seventy percent Caucasians, fourteen percent African Americans, three percent Latino, two percent Asian, and four percent Unknown. Diversity is an important aspect of this study because it could be forthcoming about the different perceptions that these ethnicities may have about AAVE and SAE.

This study selected six females who exhibit different degrees of AAVE (strong and moderate) and SAE. The researcher knew five of the six speakers through an on-campus organization. This organization met fifteen times during throughout the semester, and the speakers and researcher interacted frequently with one another. Specifically, the researcher
and speakers verbally communicated on and off-campus. In contrast, the researcher knew the other speaker by taking classes together. While taking classes together, this speaker’s speech was observed throughout two semesters.

After observation, these six female speakers were asked to record a brief definition of “achievement motivation.” (Definition: What is Achievement Motivation? 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 forth the effort to do the job well are said to be high in achievement motivation.) This was the same passage used in Rodriguez et al., 2004 study. All of the recordings were completed in quiet settings on campus. Speaker one completed her recording in a classroom; speaker two did her recording in a library’s room, speakers three and four completed their recording in a residential housing meeting room; speakers five and six did their recordings in a meeting room. Although speakers one through four completed their recording of the definition separately, speakers five and six were present at the same time of recording. (This was done out of convenience to accommodate these speakers.) All speakers were told they would not have their identities revealed to study participants.

**Phonological Features**

**Speaker One:** This speaker’s reading of the text was categorized by eleven phonological features, identified by Bailey and Thomas (1998) and Rickford (1999). There were six cases of final cluster reduction. This was specifically prevalent when the final cluster ended with the phonemes /d/ and /t/. This was observed in the reading of the words *achievement* (twice), *significant*, *accomplishment*, and *and* (twice). Additionally, there was a lax vowel in *said* /səd/. There was one instance of medial syllable deletion in the word
Lastly, there were three instances of deletion of a post-vocalic [r] in the words of desire, standards, and understand.

Speaker Two: This speaker’s reading of “achievement motivation” was characterized with twelve phonological features of AAVE. Again, there were six instances of final cluster reduction noted in the pronunciation of the words significant, accomplishment, achievement, understand, and and (twice). A deletion of a final consonant was observed in is. In place of the interdental voiced fricative in the word “the” a stop consonant was produced [d]. There was one instance of medial syllable deletion in excellence. Lastly, there were three observations of deletion of post-vocalic [r] in effort, understand, and standards.

Speaker Three: The speaker’s reading of the text was characterized by seven phonological features of AAVE. There were two instances of deletion of post-vocalic [r] in understand and standards. In place of the interdental voiced fricative in the word “the” a stop consonant was produced [d]. There were three cases of final cluster reduction in significant, understand, and accomplishment. Finally, the diphthong in the word “desire” was produced as a monophthong.

Speaker Four: This speaker’s reading of the text was also characterized by seven features of AAVE. There was one case of deletion of post-vocalic [r] in understand. Also, there were four instances of final cluster reduction in accomplishment, significant, and achievement (twice). There was one instance of medial syllable deletion in excellence.

Additionally, in place of the interdental voiced fricative in the word “the” a stop consonant was produced [d].
Speakers Five and Six: These speakers were chosen to represent the SAE condition and did not exhibit any features of AAVE while reading a definition of achievement motivation.

Participants

A sample size of at least thirty participants was needed to determine effects in this study. In order to ensure that effects were captured, one-hundred and two undergraduates were recruited to participate in this study. There were sixty-one Caucasians, twenty-five African Americans, seven Asians, two Middle Easterners, one Latina, four who identified with some other ethnic group, and two who declined to state ethnicity. Additionally, there were fifty-five females, forty-six males, and one who failed to respond. English was the first language of the sample majority, while other native languages were Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic. In addition, there were forty-four participants whose parents had a college education, twenty-three had a graduate or higher education, twenty-eight had a high school education, two had another educational level, and five declined to state their parents’ educational level. This study was carried out in three Composition I classes (native speakers and international students), one Composition II class, and one Introduction to Sociology class. These classes were selected because they represented a diverse student population. In four of the classes, the research was done at the beginning of the class; however, in the other class, the research was conducted at the end of the class period.

A questionnaire was created and designed to allow participants to express their perceptions of speakers’ accent: strong AAVE, moderate AAVE, and SAE. The first part of the instrument provided background to listeners that they would be listening to six audio recordings. Next, listeners were told that they were to select only one item in each category.
Additionally, speakers were informed that questions A, B, and C were questions about them. Question A asked their gender (male or female); question B asked their ethnicity (African American, Asian, Caucasian, Latina, Middle Eastern, or other). Also, question C asked their parents’ educational level (graduate and higher, college or university, high school level, or other)

**Instrument**

Next, the latter part of the questionnaire consisted of eight items rated on a four-point Likert scale. The first four items measured status, and the last four measured attractiveness. The first question asked participants to rate the listeners’ perception of intelligence (4- Very Intelligent, 3- Intelligent, 2- Somewhat Intelligent, and 1- Unintelligent.) Next, question two solicited listeners to evaluate their perception of the speakers’ wealth (4- Very Rich, 3- Rich, 2- Poor, and 1- Very Poor). Then, question three asked participants to evaluate the listeners’ perception of socioeconomic status (4- Upper Class, 3- Upper-Middle Class, 2- Middle Class, 1- Lower Class). Question four rated the listeners’ perception of educational status (4- Very Educated, 3- Educated, 2- Somewhat Educated, and 1- Uneducated.)

Next, question five asked listeners to evaluate the speakers’ perception of kindness (4- Very Kind, 3- Kind, 2- Somewhat Kind, and 1- Unkind.) Subsequently, question six wanted listeners to rate the listeners’ perception of sweetness (4- Very Sweet, 3- Sweet, 2- Somewhat Sweet, and 1- Sour.) Afterward, question seven requested listeners to evaluate their perception of likability (4- Very Likable, 3- Likable, 2- Somewhat Likable, 1- Unlikable.) Below is Figure 1.
You will hear six audio recordings from six female speakers. Once you have finished listening to each speaker, please mark one item for each category. A, B, and C are about you and the other questions are for each of the six speakers.

A. What is your gender?
   ___ 1 – Male
   ___ 2 – Female

B. What is your ethnicity?
   ___ 1 – African American
   ___ 2 – Asian
   ___ 3 – Caucasian
   ___ 4 – Latina
   ___ 5 – Middle Eastern
   ___ 6 – Other

C. What is your parents’ educational level?
   ___ 1 – Other
   ___ 2 – High School Level
   ___ 3 – College or University
   ___ 4 – Graduate and Higher

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Speaker ONE

1) ___ 4 – Very Intelligent
   ___ 3 – Intelligent
   ___ 2 – Somewhat Intelligent
   ___ 1 – Unintelligent

2) ___ 4 – Very Rich
   ___ 3 – Rich
   ___ 2 – Poor
   ___ 1 – Very Poor

3) ___ 4 – Upper Class
   ___ 3 – Upper-Middle Class
   ___ 2 – Middle Class
   ___ 1 – Lower Class

4) ___ 4 – Very Educated
   ___ 3 – Educated
   ___ 2 – Somewhat Educated
   ___ 1 – Uneducated

5) ___ 4 – Very Kind
   ___ 3 – Kind
   ___ 2 – Somewhat Kind
   ___ 1 – Unkind

6) ___ 4 – Very Sweet
   ___ 3 – Sweet
   ___ 2 – Somewhat Sweet
   ___ 1 – Sour

7) ___ 4 – Very Likable
   ___ 3 – Likable
   ___ 2 – Somewhat likable
   ___ 1 – Unlikable

8) ___ 4 – Very Friendly
   ___ 3 – Friendly
   ___ 2 – Somewhat Friendly
   ___ 1 – Unfriendly

*Figure 1. was the actual questionnaire given to participants. All eight questions were asked for each speaker.*
Procedure

At the beginning of the research process, the researcher provided a general explanation about the study. All students were told they would participate in a study that examined perceptions of human beings. Additionally, they were instructed that their responses were to be used for research purposes. Once consent was granted, Figure 1 was administered to participants before they listened to the pre-recorded CD. All participants were told they would have fifteen seconds to evaluate each speaker. Then, they listened and evaluated each speaker. After each recording, the researcher stopped the CD to allow the participants to quickly evaluate their perceptions by selecting one Likert-scaled item for each question. This method continued until all participants listened and rated the six speakers. For balance, the participants listened to the speakers in non-sequential order. The order of the speakers was as follows: speaker one (strong AAVE), speaker three (moderate AAVE), speaker five (SAE), speaker two (strong AAVE), speaker six (SAE), and speaker four (moderate AAVE). After the participants evaluated the speakers, their answers were collected. Then, they were debriefed on the purpose of the study.

Data Analysis

Once answers were collected, they were analyzed through RAR analytical software. During analysis, four types of statistics were used for the MANOVA test. Roy’s Greatest Root, Pillai’s Trace, Hotelling-Lawley Trace, and Wilks’ Lambda were used to determine the significant effects of this study. Four different statistics were used to test and prove the significance was stable but not varied because of various test methods. The four types of statistics presented different level of strictness, or rejection
criterion. First, answers were analyzed to test the significance of gender, ethnicity, parents’ educational level, and speaker in the following order: Pillai’s Trace, Wilks’ Lambda, Hotelling-Lawley, and Roy’s Greatest Root. The significance code to test gender for all three tests was 0.01; ethnicity was 0.001; speaker was 0. Next, mean scores were tabulated for each speaker from all responses. There were eight questions and one-hundred and two responses to the eight questions. A calculation of the mean number of eight questions according to one response was done. Then, a calculation of the mean number of one-hundred and two mean numbers was completed. The purpose of doing so was to reduce the dimension of the dataset; in essence, this calculation was designed to reduce the number of random variables. Additionally, it was used to obtain only one number to represent the perceptions of speakers. Subsequently, all female and male evaluations were averaged to measure gender as a dependent variable. Later, all answers were averaged on the basis of ethnicity: African American, Asian, Caucasian, Latina, Middle Eastern, and Other. Lastly, all participants’ reactions to six speakers were quantified and averaged according to their parents’ educational level.

Conclusion

In Chapter Three, the results of how participants evaluated each speaker based on status and attractiveness will be given. Moreover, through RAR software, an analysis will be provided to measure the following dependent variables: gender, ethnicity, and parents’ educational level. Lastly, a discussion and implications of this thesis will be explored.
Chapter Three

Results and Discussion

Results

This replication study was based on one research question: Will the strength of a speaker's accent, determined by the number of phonological features of AAVE present, influence judgments that listeners make about them? A total of one-hundred and two participants were involved in this study. Data analyses suggest that a significant effect was found for speaker accent. Additionally, there was an effect between speaker accent and listener ethnicity. In this chapter, the results from the participant questionnaire will be presented and discussed.

MANOVA Testing

There were four types of statistics employed for the MANOVA test: Pillai’s Trace, Wilks’ Lambda, Hotelling-Lawley Trace, and Roy’s Greatest Root. Factors gender, ethnicity, and speaker showed significant group differences in all four tests, while only Roy’s Greatest Root gave evidence to show that there were significant differences among levels in parents’ education level. Mean scores for gender, ethnicity, parents’ educational level, and speaker can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

This comparative table shows the significance of each variable through four different statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Pillai’s Trace</th>
<th>Wilks’ Lambda</th>
<th>Hotelling-Lawley Trace</th>
<th>Roy’s Greatest Root</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.0364014</td>
<td>0.0364014</td>
<td>0.0364014</td>
<td>0.0364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>0.0002736</td>
<td>0.0002421</td>
<td>0.0002421</td>
<td>9.625e-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Education Level</td>
<td>0.3886161</td>
<td>0.3847186</td>
<td>0.3847186</td>
<td>0.0155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>&lt; 2.2e-16</td>
<td>&lt; 2.2e-16</td>
<td>&lt; 2.2e-16</td>
<td>&lt; 2.2e-16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, in Pillai’s Trace, the significance for gender was (0. 0364014) $p > 0.01$; ethnicity (0.0002736) $p > 0$; speaker ($<2.2 \times 10^{-16}: 0.0000000000000022$) $p > 0$. Next, in Wilks’ Lambda, the significance for gender was (0. 0364014) $p > 0.01$; ethnicity (0.0002421) $p > 0$; speaker ($<2.2 \times 10^{-16}: 0.0000000000000022$) $p > 0$. Similarly, in Hotelling-Lawley Trace, all variables were found to have the same statistical significance values that were found in Wilk’s Lambda. Lastly, in Roy’s Greatest Root, the significance for gender was (0.0364) $p > 0.01$; ethnicity (9.625e-06) $p > 0$; parents’ educational level (0.0155); speaker ($<2.2 \times 10^{-16}: 0.0000000000000022$) $p > 0$.

**Speakers’ Mean Scores**

Mean scores for every speaker from all participant responses can be observed in Table 2. (Mean and standard deviation are abbreviated as M and SD) Speaker one (M = 2.530637, SD = 0.3798923); speaker two (M = 1.928046, SD = 0.4969627); speaker three (M = 2.243172, SD = 0.5372917); speaker four (M = 2.491071, SD = 0.4686967); speaker five (M = 2.969713, SD = 0.4949724); speaker six (M = 3.076506, SD = 0.6333444). Overall, the results showed how speakers five and six, who exhibited Standard American English (SAE), received the highest mean scores on status and attractiveness. Contrary, speaker two, who exhibited the strongest AAVE, received the lowest mean score on status and attractiveness out of all speakers. These results correlate with the original study’s results (Rodriguez et al., 2004). Figure 2. illustrates the plot of mean scores for the six speakers. The means for the six speakers were graphed to show how participants evaluated them. Additionally, Table 2. displays the mean scores of all six speakers.
Table 2.

*This table shows the mean scores of all speakers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 1</td>
<td>2.530637</td>
<td>0.3798923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 2</td>
<td>1.928046</td>
<td>0.4969627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 3</td>
<td>2.243172</td>
<td>0.5372917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 4</td>
<td>2.491071</td>
<td>0.4686967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 5</td>
<td>2.969713</td>
<td>0.4949724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker 6</td>
<td>3.076506</td>
<td>0.6333444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. illustrates how the mean scores were plotted for all of the speakers, which can be seen below.

![Plot of Mean Scores for Six Speakers](image)

*Figure 2. represents the plot of means for each speaker*

The order from lowest mean to highest mean based on overall status and attractiveness was as follows: speakers two (strong AAVE), three (moderate AAVE), four (moderate AAVE), one (strong AAVE), five (SAE), and six (SAE).
Ethnicity Mean Scores

Moreover, Table 3. shows mean scores and standard deviation according to ethnicity. African American (M = 2.594762, SD = 0.6170444); Asian (M = 2.385204, SD = 0.5822840); Caucasian (M = 2.554303, SD 0.6311809); Latina (M = 2.312500, SD = 0.5288549); Middle Eastern (M = 2.750000, SD = 1.0169026); Other (M = 2.364583, SD = 0.8249808).

Table 3.
The mean and standard deviation for all ethnicities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2.594762</td>
<td>0.6170444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.385204</td>
<td>0.5822840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2.554303</td>
<td>0.6311809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2.312500</td>
<td>0.5288549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>2.750000</td>
<td>1.0169026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.364583</td>
<td>0.8249808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the ethnicity factor, the MANOVA provided evidence to show the group difference among ethnicity was significant, but the mean calculation did not show that clearly. This occurred because the responses of Latina (1), Middle Eastern (2) and Other (4) were very small. The numbers here were not considered as reliable in this table (but they were considered reliable in MANOVA because of the algorithm of MANOVA). Although there were only seven persons in the Asian group, the SD showed their scores were very stable, so they were considered reliable. MANOVA showed that the group difference among ethnicity was significant. Thus, in this analysis, if the responses of Latina, Middle Eastern, and Other were not considered, due to unreliability, then Asians gave the lowest scores.

Gender Mean Scores
The results also indicated that males scored all speakers lower than females. This is evidenced in Figure 3. Females had a mean score of 2.591234, with a SD of 0.6516264. However, male participants had mean score of 2.480655 and a SD of 0.6304936.

**Parents’ Educational Level Mean Scores**

Finally, the MANOVA did not show any evidence that there was a correlation between participants’ parents’ levels of education and the way participants rated all speakers, but the students whose parents had college or university experience scored all speakers higher than others, while participants whose parents did not graduate from high schools gave the lowest scores (with a stable SD). Figure 4 shows the plot of mean scores for participants’ parents’ education level: College or university (M = 2.558239, SD = 0.6100465); graduate and higher (M = 2.519022, SD = 0.6771231); High school level (M = 2.524660, SD = 0.6835082); Other (M = 2.395833, SD = 0.5135475).

*Figure 3. This figure shows the plot of means scores according to how male and females evaluated all speakers.*
Discussion

This replication study answered the driving research question. Yes, the strength of a speaker’s accent influenced listeners’ judgments about them. The different judgments toward the six speakers were significant. Judgmental responses among questions toward the same speakers were consistent, which gave evidence that the different judgments were reliable. As seen in the results section, the speaker who read with the most phonological features of AAVE was evaluated as having less status (intelligence, education, class, and wealth) and being less attractive (kindness, sweetness, friendliness, and likability).

![Plot of Mean Scores According to Parents' Education Level](image)

*Figure 4.* This figure displays the plot of mean scores according to parents’ educational level. This could be compared with the results of speaker six, a standard English speaker, who received the most favorable ratings out all of the speakers. Perhaps these results could be a depiction of how AAVE and SAE are perceived. The majority of
participants evaluated SAE more favorably than AAVE. One possible reason for this could be that SAE is more socially and educationally acceptable by society as a whole.

One interesting finding was the attitude and perception toward speaker one and speaker four. These speakers received similar mean scores; however, speaker one exhibited strong features of AAVE, and speaker four exhibited moderate AAVE. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, all participants heard speaker one first. The comparable findings for speaker one and four could be based on the fact that speaker one was the first speaker to be evaluated. The results indicated evaluators’ initial judgment of speaker one. Although speaker one exhibited strong AAVE, there was no basis of comparison that could be made because participants only listened to one speaker, but after listening to more than one speaker, participants were able to draw their own conclusions as to how to evaluate the remaining speakers.

Additionally, there was a mean score discrepancy between speakers three and four. Both of these speakers exhibited moderate AAVE, but they did not receive the same score. Speaker three received an overall mean of 2.24, and speaker 4 had an overall mean of 2.49. Even though both speakers read with seven phonological features, the features slightly differed. This differentiation occurred in final cluster reductions, medial syllable deletion, and the replacement of diphthong with a monophthong. After listening to the speakers, the participants could have evaluated these particular differences. Perhaps some features of are more strongly associated with AAVE. Speaker three exhibited such features that may have resulted in receiving a less favorable evaluation than speaker four, who exhibited the same number of phonological features. For instance, speaker three exhibited more deletions of a post-vocalic [r] than speaker four.
Another possible reason for this inconsistency of scoring between these two speakers could be due, again, to the order in which students heard the speakers. First, participants heard speaker three and then speaker four. However, listeners heard speaker two between speakers three and four. This may have contributed to the more favorable results speaker four received.

Next, the discussion will shift to the ethnicity means score. As stated earlier, the Asian population scored all of the speakers the lowest among the other ethnic groups. This could be due to several factors, such as differences in culture and way of thinking. These particular international students learned to speak SAE or the standard way of speaking English. Being taught to speak in this dialect, there might be presumptions and assumptions about anything outside of the norm. If individuals are used to hearing a standard way of speaking, then they may be mindful that AAVE may be different than SAE but unable to specifically characterize it in a way that is fair or non-judgmental.

Another important finding was that African Americans rated all of the speakers more favorably than all other participants. African Americans may have evaluated all speakers in such a way because many can identify and use both dialects, AAVE and SAE. As noted before, code switching has been prevalent among this ethnic group. Moreover, these results were suggestive of the intercultural social implications of AAVE.

Now, there were surprising findings in this replication study. While coding the data, the researcher discovered an African American’s participant questionnaire that expressed that speaker six, who exhibited SAE, was unlikable and “made me want to puke.” This was the only outside marking (writing) found on the instrument and was striking to see. There are different ways to interpret this information. The words could
be directed toward the speaker and not the dialect of the speaker. While responding to
the speaker, this participant could have been referring to the interpretation of the
speaker’s voice quality. Maybe the speaker was referring to this dialect.

One other interesting finding was how participants evaluated speakers on the
instrument. All speakers were evaluated on the perceptions of status and attractiveness.
However, there were inconsistencies among some participants when evaluating these two
ideas. For instance, participants characterized the same speaker as being middle class
and poor at the same time. They expressed that a speaker was unlikable but friendly. It
was fascinating to discover how such speakers were depicted.

Limitations

Although this research provided some insight into perceptions of AAVE, it still
contained limitations. While a sample size of over thirty participants was needed to
determine the effects in the study, three ethnic groups’ (Latina, Middle Eastern, and
Other) responses were not considered reliable. Therefore, to ensure reliability of these
ethnic groups, a greater sample should have been chosen. The main limitation of this
study was the experimental design. This was a controlled experiment, in which speakers
read with phonological features of AAVE. Even though speakers one through four
exhibit features of AAVE, these features were controlled for experimental purposes. For
that reason, an experimental study that allowed speakers who exhibit AAVE in a natural
setting would have been more reliable.

Implications

There are potential benefits that could stem from the results of this research. A
better explanation of AAVE should be given to educate and shift low attitudes toward
speakers of this dialect. Hopefully, with a greater understanding of this dialect, people will be able identify its cultural significance to speakers of this dialect. There is still much that can be gained because of the results of these findings. As noted earlier, this replication study yielded results similar results to the original study: SAE speakers were rated more favorably in status and attractiveness than AAVE speakers. This study can be a continuation of the current discussion of perceptions of AAVE by sharing these results.

Future Research

This thesis study suggested possible issues to further explore. First, it would be interesting to examine if males scored all speakers lower than females on status and attractiveness. Additionally, it would be telling to observe whether male participants scored AAVE higher or lower than female participants and whether males scored SAE speakers as higher or lower than females. Next, it would be intriguing to study if participants with highly educated parents scored AAVE speakers higher or lower than other participants, and whether participants with highly educated parents scored SAE speakers as higher or lower than other participants. Lastly, another aspect of this study that could be further explored is whether Asian participants scored AAVE speakers higher or lower than non-Asian participants did, and whether Asians scored SAE speakers as higher or lower than non-Asians did on both status and attractiveness.

Conclusion

The purpose of this replication study was to explore the perceptions that people have about AAVE and its speakers. Specifically, this study observed the correlation between the strength of speaker accent (strong AAVE, moderate AAVE, and SAE) and judgments about them. One observable generalization was that listeners favored speakers
whose speech was characterized as standard. Specifically, standard referred to the dialect of mainstream Americans.
References


