CHAPTER 7

REGIONALITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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7.1 Introduction

Regional differentiation is one of the primitive factors in dialect differences and a natural starting point in the examination of language variation.\(^1\) As is often the case for African American speech, however, the role of regionality in African American Language (AAL) has turned out to be controversial and open to debate. In fact, Wolfram (see Wolfram 2007, this volume) observes that the role of regional differentiation in AAL has often been misunderstood and misrepresented by sociolinguists, leading to one of the major sociolinguistic myths about AAL—The Homogeneity Myth. According to this myth, there is uniformity in AAL in the United States and in the African diaspora in which regionality is invariably trumped by ethnicity. In racialized, popular culture, it is often assumed that “all Black folks talk the same way,” but there is also a more sophisticated version of the homogeneity assumption in which sociolinguists maintain that there is a uniform core in the vernacular speech of African Americans throughout the United States. As William Labov, arguably the most influential voice on AAL over the last half century, put it relatively early in his descriptive account of AAL:

By the “Black English vernacular” we mean the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of Black youth in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas of New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other urban centers. It is also spoken in most rural areas and used in the casual, intimate speech of many adults. (Labov 1972, xiii)
The uniformity hypothesis set forth by Labov and others (Fasold and Wolfram 1970; Wolfram and Fasold 1974) became an assumed sociolinguistic position—and part of the descriptive canon of AAL studies (see Labov 1998; Rickford 1999; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Wolfram (2007), however, has suggested that the uniformity position overlooks and dismisses significant aspects of regional variation in AAL; he further contends that this position resulted from biased sampling in earlier AAL studies, authoritative entextualization by sociolinguists, and interpretive ethnocentrism by the influential pioneers of AAL descriptive studies.

Practically all of the formative, early studies of AAL were concentrated on non-southern metropolitan areas, notwithstanding the fact that the roots of contemporary AAL were established in the rural South (see Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Legum et al. 1971; Fasold 1972; Labov 1972). In the history of AAL description, these studies set a precedent for the types of structures worthy of description in AAL while establishing an interpretive paradigm about the significance of these structures. The northern, urban context of AAL, however, is hardly representative of the full range of the AAL-speaking populations, particularly those of the rural South, where AAL was nurtured historically in quite localized settings.

Sociolinguists became fixated on a core, basilectal set of distinctive AAL structures, rather than the full range of structures found within and across representative communities, thus, obscuring the role that local dialect communities might play in the development of AAVE. Though linguists and sociolinguists would no doubt maintain that all dialects are of equal interest and value, they are hardly immune from “the exotic language syndrome,” where varieties that are structurally and socially most different in terms of the linguist’s previous experience would hold heightened descriptive intrigue. Accordingly, there has been a disproportionate descriptive focus in AAL on its most vernacular structures and those shared transregionally.

On a more racially sensitive level, it might be pointed out that the early descriptive studies that established the tradition of AAL inquiry were largely carried out by northern, White (male) linguists who would less likely be attuned to intra- and inter-community variation than those whose dialect sensitivities were developed and experienced within the communities themselves. Sociolinguists are not immune to the biracial socialization of American society that leads to overgeneralization and the “illusion of ethnic homogeneity” (Bonfiglio 2002, 62). Some linguists (see Spears 1999, 2008; Green 2002; Weldon 2004) have explicitly recognized the regional, temporal, and social heterogeneity of AAL, but this has often been trivialized, or even dismissed, in the supraregional assumption that assigns descriptive preference to structural features that are shared by different African American communities.

In this account, we examine the regional voices of AAL by comparing African American communities embedded in different dialect regions, with particular attention paid to the rural South. By considering a more diverse, regionally situated range of African American communities in the South and an age range of speakers to which we can apply the apparent-time assumption, we can see how space and time have played an essential role in the past and present development of AAL—and, perhaps,
even project how regionality may play a role in its future development. Current
studies of AAL certainly represent a much more diverse set of regional and social
demographics than those examined in the early tradition of AAL research, particu-
larly in the rural South (see Bailey 2001; Cukor-Avila 2001; Mallinson and Wolfram
2002; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Wolfram 2003; Carpenter 2004, 2005; Childs and
Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005; Mallinson 2006; Bloomquist 2009; Kohn and Farrington
2011; Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Furthermore, descriptive studies are now com-
plemented by perceptual studies and experimentation that offer insight into the inter-
action of regional and ethnic variables in the delimitation of AAL (see Graff, Labov,
and Harris 1986; Thomas 2002; Fridland, Bartlett, and Kreuz 2004; Thomas and Reaser
2004; Torbert 2004). Finally, there is an expanding body of ethnographic evidence on
regionality, including observations by community participants themselves about the
distribution of AAL over time and place (Childs and Mallinson 2006; Mallinson 2006;
Wolfram 2007). These increasingly diverse and complementary data sets serve as an
empirical foundation for re-examining the role of region in the development and con-
temporary status of AAL.

### 7.2 The Regional Alignment of AAL

There are several possible configurations for the regional alignment of African American
speech. To begin with, there may be accommodation to the generalized regional cohort
variety by African Americans. This kind of accommodation involves sharing region-
ally distinctive features between African Americans and European Americans, ranging
from limited, selective accommodation to widespread sharing that makes the speech of
these groups indistinguishable to outsiders. Regional accommodation is not an all-or-
nothing phenomenon and may be sensitive to differential social effect and linguistic
level of organization. Accordingly, phonological accommodation, particularly vowels,
may differ from morphosyntactic or lexical levels of language (Childs and Mallinson
2004, 2006; Childs 2005; Bloomquist 2009). And this accommodation may show dif-
fering degrees of alignment, from complete overlap to highly selective, symbolically
significant partial accommodation. The accommodation of regional varieties shared
by European Americans is clearly recognized within African American communities,
as indicated by a prominent African American community leader from the foothills of
Appalachia when she notes:

They’d say, “Say ‘honey chil’”, because I would always—it’s just a part of my lan-
guage, ‘honey child’, because I talk just like the people at the foot of the Blue
Ridge Mountain, with that kind of twang and that kind of thing, and so that was
just a part of me. (quote from 70-year-old female in Voices of North Carolina
[Hutcheson 2005])
Though such community observations may be couched in nontechnical, popular phrasing, they suggest that regionality is an integral part of experiencing dialect differences by African Americans, as it is with any other group.

By the same token, African Americans may experience language variation within the shared, ethnolinguistic features distinctive to African American communities—the so-called “common core” of AAL structures (Labov 1972; Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Rickford 1999; Green 2002). Some of these differences across diverse African American communities may be qualitative, in which a linguistic structure found in one region is different from another region, and some are quantitative, in that there are systematic differences in the relative frequency with which AAL-exclusive structures are used. Early in the description of AAL, regional differences were recognized such that Wolfram and Fasold (1974, 136) noted that the use of v for voiced th in medial and final position (e.g., breave for breathe or brovuh for brother) is “far more common in Atlantic Coast speech than further inland,” a “difference in geographical location.” Notwithstanding the long-standing concession of regional variation within AAL, it has generally taken a back seat to the description of features shared by different African American communities. Sociolinguists tend to assign footnote status to regional differences in their descriptions of AAL, but it cannot be assumed that such differences are lost on African American communities. Thus, an African American resident of Durham, North Carolina, who travels widely throughout the state, comments on regional differences within vernacular speech of residents from different areas:

Inside the African American community, when you go from region to region there’re really different voices and sounds. You can tell the difference between an African American who lives in Northeast [North Carolina] ’cause they say “skraight”, which is not something you’d hear in Durham, or you’d hear in Winston-Salem, or you’d hear in Fayetteville, but if you hear “skraight” or “skreet”, you know exactly where they came from. (quote from a 50- to 60-year-old female in Voices of North Carolina [Hutcheson 2005])

In this instance, the commentator is referring to a distinction in the use of a linguistic structure that is found exclusively among African Americans, noting that the structure is much more typical in some rural regions of the state than in urban regions. Differences in urban and rural speech and from region to region, thus, seem to be a natural dimension of recognized differences within and across African American communities.

In many respects, regionality in AAL cannot be separated from past and present language change and from other social factors that influence language variation within AAL. Accordingly, a complex set of intersecting factors needs to be considered in describing change over time and space in African American speech communities. Regionality is just one of these factors, but there is now emerging evidence to conclude that it has and continues to be an essential part of the development of AAL.
7.3 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR REGIONAL AAL

Our studies of small, rural African American communities in the southeastern United States over the past decade provide an ideal testing ground for the examination of regionality in AAL. To begin with, these communities represent quite disparate regional dialect contexts, ranging from the distinctive Outer Banks dialect of coastal North Carolina (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1997; Wolfram, Hazen, and Schilling-Estes 1999) to the dialects of southern Appalachia (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005; Mallinson 2006; Wolfram2013). In figure 7.1, we situate a number of African American communities examined by the North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP) within the broader context of the regional dialects of North Carolina. In the comparison, a couple of African American communities in the Outer Banks region, Hyde County (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Wolfram 2003) and Roanoke Island (Carpenter 2004, 2005); a community in the coastal plain, Princeville (D’Andrea 2005; Rowe 2005); and two communities in the mountains of Appalachia in the western part of the state, Beech Bottom (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002) and Texana (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005; Mallinson 2006) are examined in order to represent distinct regional dialect settings for AAL. We consider a couple of representative consonantal and morphosyntactic variables in this section and devote a separate section to vowels given their prominent role in American English regional variation. The regional locations where we have conducted research in North Carolina are given in figure 7.1.

**Figure 7.1** Regional contexts of AAL described in North Carolina by the staff of North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP).
For comparison, figures for two variables in these disparate settings are given, one for postvocalic r-lessness (figure 7.2), as in the pronunciation of fear as fea’ or fourteen as fou’teen, and one for the absence of third person singular –s inflection (figure 7.3), as in She go for She goes. Three different African American communities (Hyde County, Roanoke Island, and Princeville) in the eastern part of the state are compared with a neighboring Outer Banks European American English community (Outer Banks EAE), and two African American communities in Appalachia (Texana, Beech Bottom) are compared with a European American Appalachian English variety (Appalachian EAE). For each community, three different age groups of speakers are included in order to give an indication of language change for these features over apparent time. The graphs given here are summaries; more detailed quantitative and statistical analyses are provided in the sources cited above.

First, consider the case of postvocalic r-lessness in figure 7.2. The graph represents the relative frequency of r loss in terms of potential cases where r might have been vocalized (e.g., fea’ for fear). The different communities of African Americans obviously indicate r-lessness at quite different frequency levels. The two African American Appalachian communities (Texana, Beech Bottom) have little r-lessness, much like the European American Appalachian community with which they are compared. Furthermore, this seems to be a relatively stable pattern, showing little change among the different generational groups. The r-lessness pattern in the communities in

![Graph showing the comparison of postvocalic r-lessness in regionally situated communities in North Carolina.](image-url)

**Figure 7.2** Comparison of postvocalic r-lessness in regionally situated communities in North Carolina.
eastern North Carolina shows much more variability linked to place and generation. Princeville, situated in the coastal plain region that was historically r-less, shows the highest incidence of r-lessness, while Hyde County and Roanoke Island, situated in a traditional r-full dialect region, the Outer Banks of North Carolina (Wolfram and Thomas 2002), vary considerably.

We also see differences over apparent time in terms of regional alignment. For example, the Roanoke community, a small community of approximately 150 African Americans (Carpenter 2005) surrounded by the dominant European American community, shows a reduction in the level of r-lessness over time, thus indicating more regional alignment with the local r-full pattern for this variable. At the same time, in Hyde County to the south, a stable population of more than two thousand African American comprising 35 percent of the overall population of the county reveals a significant increase in r-lessness among the younger generation of speakers, thus, showing divergence from the regional norm over time.

Now consider figure 7.3, which summarizes the incidence of third person inflection –s absence in structures such as She like school or The dog always like to eat. The pattern of –s absence is one of the structures considered to be part of the common-core structures of AAL (cf. Labov 1972; Rickford 1999; Green 2002).
Again, we see a significant difference in the relative incidence of –s absence based on locale and generation. The Black Appalachian communities of Texana and Beech Bottom obviously do not share this structural pattern to the same degree with the other African American communities; in fact, they tend to align with the regional white community, a finding confirmed by the examination of southern highland regional traits such as the use of –s on third-person plural forms in *The dogs barks* (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2004) and the use of /ai/ ungliding before voiceless consonants (e.g., *raht* for *right*). As with r-lessness, the communities in coastal North Carolina (Princeville, Hyde County, Roanoke Island) show more internal and external variability for verbal –s absence. Though quantitative, there are significant differences in the frequency levels of –s absence. Thus, we saw that the frequency of third-person singular –s absence ranged from more than 75 percent to less than 5 percent.

Finally, we should note that there are cases in which common-core features and regional features may converge, as in the case of r-lessness. That is, the linguistic trait is characteristic both of AAL and of some adjacent regional European American varieties in which AAL exists. While r-lessness is commonly cited as a core trait of AAL (Labov 1972; Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Rickford 1999; Green 2002), it is obviously affected by regional context. In fact, the re-inspection of some of the early studies of AAL reveals that this was evident in the initial studies of AAL. For example, Labov et al’s (1968) study of AAL in New York City, a regional r-less context, shows levels of r-lessness that were nearly categorical, whereas Wolfram’s study of AAL in Detroit, an r-full area, shows levels between 60–70 percent for working-class African American speakers (Wolfram 1969). The results of such comparisons provide evidence for concluding that AAL may show significant regional and generational variability from community to community, both in terms of its accommodation to the overarching regional dialect and in terms of the distribution of features exclusive to the African American communities within these regional settings.

In addition to our objective studies of regional AAL, there are some recent perceptual experiments to tease out the intersection of ethnicity and regionality in dialect identification (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Thomas and Reaser 2004; Torbert 2004; Childs and Mallinson 2006). Listeners from outside the region consistently misjudge the ethnic identity of African Americans from Appalachia and the Outer Banks (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2006), showing that regionality may trump ethnicity in listener perception of African Americans in some settings. These perceptual studies support the conclusion that regional features can take on primary indexicality (Silverstein 2003) for African Americans, in which speakers are primarily identified as being from the coast or the mountains vis-à-vis being African American. The evidence from speaker identification experiments, along with the cross-generational sociolinguistic analysis of dialect features, supports the contention that both earlier varieties of English spoken by African Americans and contemporary varieties of AAL may indeed be quite regionalized.
In asserting the role of regionality in AAL, we do not mean to say that linguists have categorically denied this dimension of variation. Lisa Green, for example, notes:

There are regional differences that will distinguish varieties of AAL spoken in the United States. For example, although speakers of AAL in Louisiana and Texas use very similar syntactic patterns, their vowel systems may differ. Speakers of AAL in areas in Pennsylvania also share similar syntactic patterns with speakers in Louisiana and Texas; however, speakers in areas in Pennsylvania are not likely to share some of the patterns that the Louisiana and Texas speakers share with other speakers of southern regions. (2002, 1)

Though Green (2002) acknowledges regionality, this tends to be the exception rather than the rule in AAL descriptions. By the same token, the acknowledgment lacks specific descriptive detail about the nature of regional differences in AAL and thus is a minor qualification. Our empirical inquiry here suggests that region is a more significant variable than has been admitted, and that it cannot be ignored as a factor in describing the variable nature of AAL.

7.4 Regional Vowels in AAL

The following comment by an African American teenager illustrates how the implicit linguistic knowledge of community members can supersede the knowledge of academic experts:

I can tell ... You from Durham, right? Yeah, I can tell because of the way you talk, boy. You like, “you like to [stɔdi] (study).”

In less than ten minutes, this teen was able to identify the location of the peer’s home, justifying this identification by imitating a distinctive vocalic feature, the raised and fronted version of /ʌ/ found in the speech of several Frank Porter Graham (FPG) participants from Durham, North Carolina (Kohn and Farrington 2011). Until recently, the lack of detailed acoustic studies has left linguists with little empirical evidence to discuss the regional distribution of AAL vowels. Although Labov (1991, 1994, 2001) stated that African Americans resist participation in local sound changes, empirical evidence suggests that this is not always the case, particularly in enclave communities (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Childs and Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005; Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Further, participation in local European American sound changes is not the only source for regional differences in AAL vowels. Older regional variants may be retained, or natural diachronic processes can lead to independent vowel innovations.

The lack of vocalic accommodation to the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) has often been a prime source of evidence used to reinforce the homogeneity myth of AAL. A number
of research studies indicate that AAL did not participate in regional vowel shifts such as the NCS (Labov 1991, 1994; Gordon 2000). Other studies indicate that some aspects of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) (Bailey and Thomas 1998) and other regional changes such as the merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ and /ai/ glide weakening in prevoiceless phonetic contexts were not accommodated in African American communities (Bernstein 1993). Ironically, these observations contrast starkly with the earliest positions held by dialectologists. Some of the earliest researchers who studied AAL vowels, including Kurath and McDavid (1961) and Williamson (1968), assumed that once class and education levels were controlled AAL vowels were identical to the regional vowels of European Americans English (EAE).

Further analysis reveals that both positions are oversimplifications. For example, in an examination of the African American speakers in the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS), Dorrill (1986) identifies that while AAL was distinct from local EAE, resisting back vowel fronting and retaining monophthongal variants of /e/ and /o/, it also showed similarities including allophonically conditioned /ai/ glide weakening. Similar results emerge from Bailey and Thomas’s (1998) analysis of ex-slave recordings which demonstrates shared innovations among European Southern English (ESE) and AAL including /ai/ glide weakening, the pin/pen merger, and several pre liquid mergers in word pairs such as still/steal and sell/sale.

In addition to evidence provided by these early studies, the existence of relic forms in some African American speech communities indicates that regional influences impact AAL. The decline of diphthongal schwa (as in boid for bird) in Louisiana, for example, lagged in AAL compared to other varieties in the region (Strand, Wroblewski, and Good 2010). Evidence from New York City English indicates that even as the distinctive raised /ɔ/ variant, found in words like coffee and dog, is declining among local European American speakers, young African Americans continue to use this form (Becker 2009; Coggshall and Becker 2010). This feature differentiates New York City AAL from southern varieties of AAL, just as diphthongal schwa is a regionally distinct feature of Louisiana AAL.

Studies of enclave communities in the Appalachian and tidewater regions of North Carolina identify a range of regional vocalic features in local AAL varieties, although the extent of accommodation to regional EAE varies from almost indistinguishable vowel spaces in Beech Bottom, to mixed alignment in the communities of Texana (Childs and Mallinson 2004; Childs 2005); Hyde County (Wolfraam and Thomas 2002); Roanoke (Childs, Mallinson, and Carpenter 2010); and Ocracoke (Wolfraam, Hazen, and Tamburro 1997). Evidence for accommodation to local varieties includes the fronting of /o/ and /u/ in Hyde, Roanoke, Beech Bottom, and Texana. As AAL typically retains back vowels (Thomas 2007), back-vowel fronting in these enclave communities emerges as a local distinction. Older African Americans in these communities also use local variants of /ai/ gliding (Childs, Mallinson, and Carpenter 2010). Although the regional “hoi toid” diphthong variants are not as common in the speech of younger African Americans, the local /ai/ variant in Beech Bottom shows no signs of dying out across generations. While younger generations in some of these enclave communities appear
of RJ. AAL norms, some features continue to make local AAL regionally distinct.

Increased interest in regional vocalic distinctions of AAL has resulted in a more extensive sample of cities and rural communities in the northern and southern United States. Like previous work in enclave communities, these studies indicate a range of accommodation to the predominate variety, from almost complete accommodation to only partial alignment.

Fridland (2003a, b) and Fridland and Bartlett (2006) identify a host of SVS features in the AAL of Memphis, Tennessee, including reversal of /ei/ and /ɛ/ nuclei, back vowel fronting, and reduced /ai/ glides before voiceless obstruents. Evidence for the SVS in the nuclei of /ei/ and /ɛ/ among African Americans has also been found in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia (Andres and Votta 2010), and the research triangle in North Carolina (Kohn and Farrington 2011). Looking at front vowels and /ai/ in Statesville, North Carolina, Holt (2011) concludes that, except for duration and trajectory qualities for /i/ and /ɛ/, AAL and the local dialect are statistically indistinguishable. Urban/rural distinctions also contribute to regional variation in AAL, as illustrated in Dodsworth and Kohn’s (2009) comparison of the AAL of Raleigh, North Carolina, to that of rural Warren County, North Carolina. Results indicate that SVS patterns are more advanced among rural African Americans than among urban African Americans.

Although the emergence of regional norms may be expected in the southern United States where African Americans and European Americans have lived in biracial communities for centuries, partial accommodation to regional norms may also be found outside of the South. Jones (2003) finds that some middle-class African American females in Lansing, Michigan, are participating in /æ/ raising, in line with the NCS. African Americans with extensive European American contacts in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were also found to lower the nucleus of /ɛ/, following the NCS (Purnell 2010). Several studies identify back vowel fronting among African Americans in Columbus, Ohio (Thomas [1989] 1993; Durian, Dodsworth, and Schumacher 2010). In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, while local African Americans do not participate in the socially salient /au/ monophthongization (as in dahntahn for downtown), Eberhardt (2008, 2009) presents evidence of low back vowel mergers between /a/ and /ɔ/. As AAL generally maintains this phonemic distinction (Thomas 2007), Eberhardt concludes that this finding indicates alignment with the local variety. Mixed alignment predominates in most analyses of AAL regional vocalic accommodation, with variables such as social contact with European Americans (Purnell 2010), levels of integration in the schools (Deser 1990; Kohn and Farrington 2013), social stratification (Jones 2003), history of race relations, as well as the social salience of the features (Eberhardt 2009), all potentially playing a role.

Regional differences among vowels in AAL also emerge independently of local EAE. For example, pre-rhotic front vowel centralization, commonly depicted orthographically with two RRs, as in thurr for there, is an iconic St. Louis AAL feature (Blake and Shousterman 2010). Found in Memphis, Tennessee, as well (Pollock and Berni 1996; Hinton and Pollock 2000), this feature appears to have emerged in AAL in the mid-twentieth century.
Unsurprisingly, the extent to which individuals identify with a region may also influence the frequency and extent of local variants in speech. For example, in a resampling study of Detroit, Nguyen (2006) finds voice-conditioned allophony for /ai/ glide weakening (that is, /ai/ glide weakening is strongly favored when the following phonetic context is voiced) in both her data set and in Wolfram’s 1969 sample. This contradicts findings from Anderson’s (2003) Detroit study where /ai/ glide weakening also appeared in pre-voiceless conditions. Nguyen attributes this difference to regional attitudes as individuals from Anderson’s (2003) study indicated a cultural affinity with the South. Fridland (2003b) similarly cites the importance of southern identity in the expansion of /ai/ glide weakening among African Americans in Memphis. One African American female from Hickory, North Carolina, specifically discusses the regional significance of /ai/ glide weakening in pre-voiceless environments:

When you go anywhere else they automatically know you’re from the South . . . and we got all the little Ebonics stuff that we be using . . . but I mean like [ɹə:s] (‘rice’) I know I say [ɹə:s] . . . I’m from down here. You gotta accommodate me.

Recent research into regional variations among AAL vowel systems illustrates the important role of regional features in AAL vowels. First, researchers should not assume that a failure of African Americans to participate in local EAE vowel changes indicates a lack of regional differences as a whole. Even as EAE changes, older vowel productions may continue to mark AAL as regionally distinct from other regional varieties of AAL (Coggshall and Becker 2010), and regional differences unique to AAL are also emerging (Blake and Shousterman 2010). Second, AAL is not impervious to regional vowel changes. Selective participation appears to be the norm, rather than the exception. Third, it should be noted that the status of accommodation is dynamic and may change over time. For example, there is now evidence that some African American residents in some northern cities are accommodating to parts of the NCS (Jones 2003; Jones and Preston 2006) and perhaps will show more participation in the future. Similarly, Henderson (1996) found that, although a minority pattern, some middle-class Africans Americans participate in the regionally distinctive Philadelphia short a pattern, notwithstanding Graff et al.’s (1986) finding that this vowel has indexical status as a “white vowel.” The likelihood of accommodation to regional European American features depends on a host of demographic, social, and psychological factors, potentially including the importance of regional identity to the individual. Implicit community member awareness of regional distinctions indicates that regional vowel variation is an important part of AAL.

7.5 The Interaction of Time and Space

The relationship between regionality and temporality in AAL, like any other variety, can be quite complex and interactional. As Rickford (1987, 1999) points out, convergence
and divergence between AAL and cohort European American English can take place at different points in time. Research on small, rural southern communities empirically supports the conclusion that there may be different trajectories of change and regional accommodation at different times and in different places. The empirical evidence from apparent-time studies reveals at least three different trajectories of change, as indicated in figures 7.4a–c. These include one (7.4a) that shows strong regional alignment at an earlier period of time and subsequent divergence, one (7.4b) that shows more recent regional alignment, and one that shows a curvilinear trajectory that includes both periods of regional alignment and divergence over time (7.4c). The trajectory lines represent

**Figure 7.4a** Regional reduction and AAE intensification: The Hyde County (Eastern NC) trajectory.

*Source:* Adapted from Wolfram and Thomas 2002, 200.

**Figure 7.4b** AAE reduction and regional dialect maintenance: The Beech Bottom trajectory (Appalachian NC).

an approximation of usage levels for the inventory of features examined, rather than a precise, composite measurement of the actual linguistic features found in analyses such as Wolfram and Thomas (2002), Wolfram (2003), Mallinson and Wolfram (2002), Childs and Mallinson (2004), Carpenter (2004, 2005), D’Andrea (2005), and Rowe (2005). Core AAL refers to features that have traditionally been associated with vernacular varieties of AAL, including inflectional –s absence, copula absence, prevocalic syllable-final cluster reduction, and so forth. Regional varieties used in the comparison (Outer Banks English, Appalachian English, regional European American English) refer to local dialect varieties typically associated with the European American population, though our analysis indicates that this ethnolinguistic demarcation is not completely justified. The labels on the x axis refer to different generations of speakers based on significant historical events; these include speakers born before World War I (for Hyde County), those born following World War I but before racial integration of public schools (pre-1960), those who attended school while integration was being implemented (1960–1975), and those who attended school following integration (after 1975).

There are obviously a variety of patterns of regional accommodation and different explanations for the patterns of alignment that emerge over time. For example, the Appalachian African American community in Beech Bottom is a very small, receding community that has been quite removed from other African American communities geographically and socially over the past half-century. Furthermore, the few remaining members of the community self-report mixed ethnicity rather than African American identity, even though the older residents attended a segregated school established for African Americans in the area (Mallinson 2004). Perhaps more importantly, residents show a value orientation that aligns with the surrounding European American culture (Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Mallinson 2004). In this context, regional convergence seems quite understandable, and speakers are losing remnants of AAL as they more fully accommodate the Appalachian English features of the European American dialect community.

In contrast, Hyde County has a long-term African American community of more than two thousand people that was once highly insulated from outside influences. At present, the younger community members indicate increasing social contact with

![Figure 7.4c](attachment:image.png)
external African American communities, and many youth reveal a kind of exocentric (i.e., community-external) value orientation that accommodates urban cultural norms (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). In this context, once-entrenched regional dialect features of the Outer Banks dialect from almost three centuries of coexistence between African Americans and European Americans are rapidly receding and linguistic features associated with urban AAL are intensifying.

The cases of Texana and Roanoke Island, which show curvilinear paths of change, are somewhat more complicated by internal social divisions, particularly with respect to external values and norms. Thus, some middle-aged and younger speakers show shifts toward or away from AAL and the neighboring European American variety that correlate with endocentric (i.e., community-internal) and exocentric value orientations (Carpenter 2004, 2005; Childs and Mallinson 2004, 2006; Carpenter and Hilliard 2005; Mallinson 2006). Both of these communities are relatively small but have differential patterns of external contact that provide choices between traditional rural and encroaching urban value orientations.

We have already noted that the early, canonical position on the transregional status of AAL was derived from a northern, urban vernacular sampling bias focused on transplant southern communities from different regions of the South. In fact, at the time of the pioneering studies of AAL in the North, the majority of middle-aged and older speakers in many northern cities were still first-generation southern in-migrants, and it was often difficult to find enough older, lifetime residents in these urban contexts for sociolinguistic interviews (see Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969). The vernacular was clearly aligned with southern dialects, so regionality was obviously in play—just not the regionality of the cohort northern metropolitan norms. In studies over the next couple of decades, it did not appear that African Americans in these northern metropolitan contexts accommodated to cohort vowel norms (Graff et al. 1986). But change over time might take place differently in an urban northern transplant community than in a long-standing small southern rural community, and regional accommodation can change over time as well. We cannot necessarily assume that that lack of local dialect accommodation suggested in Graff et al. (1986) will persist as a norm. Indeed, as indicated in the discussion of vowel alignment, there is emerging evidence that some social groups of African Americans in the North are now accommodating local vowel norms in northern metropolitan areas (Jones 2003; Jones and Preston 2006).

Studies of AAL change in apparent time and real time show that a number of historical, demographic, and social factors need to be considered in explaining different trajectories of change and regional alignment over time. Factors include the regional setting, the size of the community, macro- and micro-sociohistorical events, patterns of contact with adjacent European American communities and with external African American communities, intra-community social divisions, and cultural values and ideologies. The nature of linguistic variables is also a factor; different linguistic variables may follow diverse paths of change based on their linguistic composition and their indexical status within the community.
7.6 Conclusion

An authentic understanding of AAL variation can neither overlook nor underestimate the role of region in accounting for differences across AAL communities. Accommodation to overarching regional traits that are shared with cohort European American communities as well as regional differences within the linguistic traits exclusive to the African American communities need to be recognized in AAL dialect differentiation. Furthermore, there are different constellations of these traits that may be involved in the regional and social construction of AAL. Regional alignment is sensitive to time and space in AAL, and it will no doubt continue to shift in the future development of AAL as well. In the descriptive focus on AAL over the past half-century, regionality has not taken its rightful place at the sociolinguistic table; it is time for regionality to receive the same portion as other variables in the study of past, present, and future trends of development in AAL.

Note

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