Copula Contraction and Deletion among African American Vernacular English* (AAVE) Speakers

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ABSTRACT

This is a cross-sectional study designed to analyze the correlation between the structural and social variables and the pattern of contraction and deletion of the copula verb in the speech of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers in Athens in Georgia, USA using a questionnaire. The results show that the frequency of copula contraction is higher than that of deletion in all factor groups including the age of the speakers where this study found that younger speakers tend to have higher frequency of contraction and deletion of the copula than older speakers. This study analyzes this as a function of the fact that younger speakers of AAVE are conscious of the linguistic and social differences between AAVE speakers and speakers of Standard American English (SAE) and they consciously make

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choices regarding which norm to use at which contexts to satisfy their communicative and socio-cultural needs. This sort of conscious social behavior is not likely to disappear with age rather it might increase as a correlate of the perceived physical, socio-cultural and psychological distance between AAVE speakers and speakers of other varieties. This study shows that such perceived linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological distance has negative effects on pedagogy and I proffer the remedy.

Key Words
copula contraction, copula deletion, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Standard American English (SAE), cross-sectional, social variables, morphosyntax.

1. Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been the subject of studies by both linguists, sociolinguists and social variationists for a long time now and all scholars in the mentioned disciplines have consented to the fact that the need for sociocultural identity has necessitated the emergence, consolidation and stability of a viable speech community based on this variety of English (Cukor-Avila 2001). This study examines copula deletion and contraction (one aspect of the morphosyntax of this variety of English) in relation to some social and structural variables that might shape or affect its usage in actual speech situation. But before I do that, let me define AAVE in the context of other co-existing varieties of English spoken in the United States. A survey conducted by Mufwene (2001) on the question of what AAVE is elicited a wide range of possible responses from participants. But three of the factors that participants considered in their responses to the survey question included race, structural differences and intelligibility. For instance, one of the participants describes AAVE as “a type of English not easy to understand. It is spoken mostly by people of Black skin or/and by other people living in areas where black people

live". Two of the three factors named above stand out in the description, namely, race and degree of intelligibility to speakers of other varieties of English. Yet another participant in the survey describes AAVE as "a dialect of English mutually intelligible with standard and other Englishes but with different ways of structuring sentences and some different vocabulary". Two factors also stand out in the description: degree of intelligibility with other English varieties and structural differences.

Other factors such as socioeconomic status associated with the speakers of AAVE and some socio-historical biases associated with the speakers of this variety were identified in the description rendered by many participants in that survey. However, as linguists, our orientation and training should help us to view things about language, dialect, accent, idiolect and similar phenomena in a more objective manner. This, perhaps, is why Mufwene (2001: 37) describes AAVE as "English as it is spoken by or among African Americans". This characterization is adopted as our working definition of AAVE because it is objective and free from the burden of the tendency to stigmatize the variety as well as its speakers. For one, it is not charged with any socio-economic nuances or socio-historical divide among the speakers of AAVE and speakers of other varieties. Also, it avoids the structural criterion thereby dodging the pitfall of overstressing the structural differences between AAVE and other varieties thereby exonerating itself from issues relating to degree of intelligibility and race. Mufwene (2001) justifies this definition by stating that this characterization, though vague, "enables us to discuss peculiarities of verbal communication among African Americans even if all we find in a discourse are instances of rhetorical strategies without structural features or just prosodic features without anything else".

2. Structural Relationship between AAVE and Other Varieties:

Many studies have been carried out on the grammatical system of AAVE in an attempt to describe the fundamental differences and similarities between AAVE and Standard American English (SAE). Many of these studies were based on the analyses of adolescents' speech in Northern urban areas (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972 all cited in Cukor-Avila 2001: 94). These studies concentrated on the description of grammatical features such as tense marking and the use of present tense *"be"*. Also, according to Cukor-Avila (2001: 94), the grammatical features most studied include:

1. (a). the absence of present tense third person singular *-s* as in:
   She work in the city
   (b). the absence of third person singular copula as in:
   He ø in the house watchin' TV
   (c). the absence of plural and second person plural copula:
   They ø gonna be here soon
   (d). the use of invariant *be* for habitual action as in:
   They be out in the yard every night
   We be talkin' on the phone a lot.
   (Cukor-Avila 2001:94)

Therefore, these features formed the core of investigation into the relationship of Southern AAVE to the South White Vernacular English (SWVE). For example, Wolfram (1971, 1974) suggested qualitative similarity in the distribution of singular and plural copula absence for both African American and the White children living in rural Mississippi and observes that since only the AAVE speaking children in his study use habitual *be*, he concludes that the distributive *be* is typically not found in the Southern White speech, though it is an integral aspect of AAVE

(Wolfram 1974:524 cited in Cukor-Avila 2001: 94). Dunlap (1974) and Sommer (1986) come to a similar conclusion based on their data elicited in Atlanta from African American and White fifth graders of comparable social classes.

While these studies made substantial contribution to the understanding of the distribution of copula forms in younger speakers, enough data was not provided to enable us observe the evolution of the black-white speech relationship (Cukor-Avila 2001:95). A Study by Bailey and Bassett (1986) was designed to address this gap in the research through an examination of the present tense *be* forms in adult speech. The work by Bailey and Bassett (1986) shows a similar distribution of habitual *be* in the speech of rural African American and White adults. The former worked on the data collected in Mississippi and Louisiana for the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States and the latter collected data from rural African Americans and Whites over 65 years old from Texas and Mississippi. Also, these speakers show similar patterns for singular and plural copula absence and the use of *is* for *are*. These works provide useful information about the distribution of the invariant *be* and copula absence in SWVE and AAVE but left the question of the presence and distribution of other AAVE features in the South untouched.

This is where work by Cukor-Avila (2001) fills the gap. That work was a longitudinal study of the informants based in rural Texas community of Springville during eleven years of fieldwork in that community. This enabled the researcher an opportunity to record many informants numerous times and in different contexts. The result of the analyses of the data from Springville suggests that different socio-historical contexts correlate with linguistic differences between AAVE and SWVE. That is, during the pre-world war II period, for example, there was significant social contact between African Americans and the Whites and so there were many shared linguistic features. However, the post-world war II period witnessed a significant reduction in social contact between these two groups and

consequently, a reduction in the linguistic similarities. For example, in the tabulation of the features in relation to socio-historical period as deduced from the age of the informants and in relation to relative stability of the features, Cukor-Avila (2001:106) shows that the copula absence (our main focus in this study) is one of the AAVE features that was shared by SWVE but which has disappeared from the latter overtime (Labov 1969, Feagin 1979 and Rickford et al. 1991 etc.). Such copula absence is exemplified as in (2).

2. (a). Bobby ø not workin' this summer (Bobby is not working this summer) and
   (b). You ø taller than Sheila (You are taller than Sheila) (Cukor-Avila 2001:104)

Also, the AAVE features that have been stable in both AAVE and SWVE (still shared) include *y'all* and *fixinto/fitna* as in example (3).

3. (a). Y'all don't make no sense (You (pl) don't make any sense) and
   (b). We're fixin'to go to the store (We are planning to go to the store) (Cukor-Avila 2001:103).

Other features of AAVE are shown to be innovative developing more recently only in AAVE and never shared with SWVE or any other varieties. The innovative *had + past* (what I prefer to call partial regularization) is a case in point as in example (4).

4. Today I had went to work (Today I had gone to work) (Cukor-Avila 1995; Rickford and Rafal 1996).

The reasons of these innovations (that is the development of new features) within AAVE and the reasons for the stunning similarities among speakers of AAVE from all parts of the United States have been studied by Wolfram (2004) who traces the emergence of urban AAVE as a by-product of the

great migration in which African Americans moved from the rural South to the metropolitan North in the early and mid-twentieth century. Though AAVE was carried to the North by the African Americans, there was no accommodation to the local Northern linguistic norms due to large scale social, racial and ethnic segregation of the African Americans who moved to the urban North. This led to more divergence in their speech and some innovation in style in an attempt to cultivate and perpetuate African American socio-cultural identity. This was studied by scholars like Labov 1987 Bailey and Maynor (1989); Poplack (2000); Poplack and Tagliamante (2001) as an instance of language change under the "Divergence Hypothesis". Divergence hypothesis maintains that AAVE is evolving independently in ways that increase the differences between AAVE and other vernacular dialects of English. But, many scholars agree that the locus of independent innovation within the AAVE is largely urban and that change within the variety is diffusing from urban to rural areas. This diffusion is, sort of, dissipating the featural distinction between the urban and the rural norms of AAVE (Wolfram and Thomas 2002). The paper concludes that "large metropolitan areas appear to be the current socio-cultural centers for innovation and the establishment of supra-regional norms in AAVE with change diffusing from these urban locations into more rural regions".

3. The Copula Absence

Of all the features of AAVE studied in the past four decades, copula absence or deletion and contraction is one of the canonical features of this variety that has been very stable and has constituted one of the major distinctive features of AAVE that is shared by all AAVE speakers in the United States. For example, Wolfram (2004:127-130) presents a tabulation of features of AAVE according to whether the features are

"new and intensifying structures" (that is innovative features), "receding urban AAVE features" or "stable urban AAVE features". This tabulation lists copula absence on top of the list of stable features along with completive *done* and negative concord (double negation). The question may now be; why is it important to study the AAVE copula absence in American sociolinguistics? Rickford (1999:61) answers this question when he states that "copula absence sets AAVE apart from all other American dialects especially with respect to *is* absence. European American vernacular varieties as far apart as Mississippi, New York and Palo Alto, California show some *are* absence but little or no *is* absence; by contrast, *is* absence for African American vernacular speakers in the same areas run to 80 percent or more" (Labov 1969 ; McElhinny 1993; Wolfram 1974 all cited in Wolfram 2004).

Another reason why it is important to study the copula absence is that scholars who are interested in the historical evolution of AAVE have often turned to the study of copula absence which has played a crucial role in determining whether AAVE derives from an earlier plantation creoles as AAVE resembles some Caribbean creoles in its pattern of copula absence especially as affected by following grammatical categories (see Alleyne 1980; Bailey 1965; Baugh 1979, 1980; Bickerton 1973; Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Rickford and Blake 1990; Stewart 1970b, Winford 1988).

4. Which Forms Constitute the Copula Deletion and or Contraction?

There have been some controversies among researchers as to whether the contraction and deletion of *is* should be treated the same with the contraction and deletion of *are*. That is, should the tabulation for calculation of the frequency of occurrence of the copula include *is* only as a variable, or should it include *is* and *are* as separate variables or should it include

is and *are* together as one variable. This controversy produces the paradigm on table1 adopted from Rickford (1999:63):

Table 1 Previous contraction/deletion tabulation of is and are

	is	are	is + are
Labov et al. (1968), Labov (1969)	+		
Wolfram (1974)	+	+	
Wolfram (1969), Poplack and Sankoff (1987)			+

As table 1 shows, the earliest position on the matter was presented by Labov et al. and has *is* as the only variable. The argument was that the deletion of the second person plural *are* could be handled by "a general r-vocalization or desulcalization rule" (Rickford 1999:62). The next position is presented by Wolfram (1974) who argues that the deletion of the second person plural *are* should not be handled by the so-called general desucalization rule because "desulcalization in *'po'* and similar forms, for example, was strongly favored by a following consonant whereas the deletion of copulative *are* was not" (Rickford 1999:63) and so the two should be treated separately. However, Wolfram (1969); Poplack and Sankoff (1987) and Rickford (1999) argue for treating the contraction and deletion of *is* and *are* together as a single variable; the position adopted in this work. The argument in support of this position is based strictly on the structural and featural consideration and on the ease of calculation of the frequency of the variable. The structural constraints refer to the observed effects of environment on the contraction and deletion of the copula. That is, the grammatical environments that the contraction and deletion of *is* can occur is similar to those that the contraction and deletion of *are* can occur. Also, this unified treatment would allow us to present two tabulations instead of four to analyze the copula contraction in accordance with Occam's razor.

The environmental constraints identified by many scholars as affecting

the copula behavior in a sentence include Following Grammatical Environment (FGE) (including gonna, verb + ing, locatives, adjectives, noun phrases and so on). The next group of constraints includes Subject Constraints (SC) (including personal pronouns, other pronouns and noun phrases). Yet another group of constraints include Following Phonological Environment (FPE) (including following consonants and following vowels). Also, another group of constraints include Preceding Phonological Environment (PPE) (including preceding consonants and preceding vowels). Another very important but external factor that have been considered by scholars is the age group of the AAVE speakers (including younger and older) Cukor-Avila (2001), Rickford (1999).

Considering these constraints in relation to the issue of whether the contraction and deletion of *is* and *are* show enough similarity in pattern to be considered as the same variable, Rickford (1999:68) presents the results of the study of spontaneous speech collected from interview and peer group sessions with approximately 30 AAVE speakers from East Palo Alto in California. The general picture of the result is that on the contraction tokens, although *are* contraction is more likely (90%) than *is* contraction (68%), the constraints on the contraction of the two forms are virtually identical. For example, in the Following Grammatical Environment factor group, contraction strongly favors *gonna* and strongly disfavors noun phrases in both *is* and *are* runs. What this means is that generally when *is* or *are* are followed by the form *gonna* in a sentence, they are more likely to be deleted or contracted than when they are followed by a noun phrase. Similarly, the external factor namely age group also presents a clear pattern of contraction for the copula with younger people favoring contraction (67% for *is* and 74 % for *are*) than older people (41% for *is* and 41 % for *are*). This presents similarity of pattern.

On the deletion side, though the similarity is not as striking as in contraction, the results is still comparable especially with respect to Following Grammatical Environment (where *gonna* strongly favors copula

deletion (81% for *is* and 76 % for *are*), but noun phrase strongly disfavors deletion with (30% for is and 30% for are). The correlation between the age of the speakers and copula deletion is also apparent where younger people again strongly favor copula deletion (87% for *is* and 79% for *are*), but older people disfavor copula deletion (with 25% for *is* and 21 % for *are*). Also, this shows similarity of pattern. Support for this similarity of pattern can drawn from Labov's contraction data from New York City Jets. Labov (1969:731-746 cited in Rickford 1999: 70) found that contraction was most favored by a preceding vowel, by a pronoun subject, and by a following *gonna*. Furthermore, Labov (1972c:84) reports that members of the Cobras street gang in New York City, like most other AAVE speakers deleted *is* more often when it had a pronominal subject (e.g. He) than when it had a noun phrase (e.g. the man), and more often when recorded with their peer group than when interviewed individually (Rickford 1999:10). This difference in frequency between when a gang member is interviewed with peers and when a gang member is interviewed individually introduces another dimension of variation of the copula.

Apart from age, scholars have shown that other social factors like style, social class, gender and peer pressure have linguistic correlates in the copula contraction and deletion, and in this study, the hypothesis is that copula contraction and deletion among AAVE speakers in Georgia would pattern along the same lines described in the works discussed above especially in relation to environmental constraints and the age of the speakers.

5. Methodology: Data Collection

All the quantitative analyses of sociolinguistic phenomena in the literature that we have referred to in this work are based on the analyses of data collected through interviews, peer sessions and analyses of corpus data of speech of AAVE speakers. And as it is well known, different data

collection procedures may have differential effects on the outcome of any study. In this study, I decided to go on a survey using a questionnaire. The questionnaire method was chosen for two main reasons. The first reason is that the questionnaire method is amenable to the need to collect a relatively large size of data that are easy to analyze in a relatively short period of time. The second reason, and perhaps the more important one, is to observe the effects of social correlates of the difference in medium (that is written form as opposed to verbal form) and method of data collection on the linguistic behavior of AAVE speakers. Also, I decided to personally conduct the survey by myself in an assumption that interpersonal relationship and the degree of perceived in-group affiliation or lack of such affiliation might influence the results in interesting ways. This is because I speak the English language with an accent and this might affect the response that I might elicit from respondents as a result of the perceived lack of in-group affiliation. This assumption is informed by a result of a study conducted by Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994: 247) in East Palto Alta on an African American teenage girl named Foxy. Foxy was observed to delete *is* and *are* 70 percent of the time in one interview with an African American man with whom she was familiar, but did so only 40 percent of the time in another interview with a European American whom she had not met before. In the same way, since all the subjects in my survey were total strangers; coupled with my accent, the assumption seems to be genuine and we will let the data speak for itself.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections. Section A consisted of general instructions and nine questions to elicit demographic information about the respondents. Sections B to E were the main sections arranged according to the environmental constraint groups. Section B contains 10 questions based on Following Grammatical Environment group of constraints (gonna, verb + ing, locatives, adjectives, noun phrases). Section C contains 6 questions based on Subject factor group of constraints (personal pronouns, other pronouns, noun phrases). Section D contains 4 questions

based on Following Phonological Environment group of constraints (_____consonant , ___vowel). Section E contains 4 questions based on Preceding Phonological Environment (consonant____, vowel____).

The questionnaire was administered to respondents along Broad Street and adjourning streets and at bus stops all in down town Athens and a few of the questionnaires were administered in the UGA main library to AAVE speakers who either work there or visit the library from the neighborhood to access internet at the public access section of the library. Generally, I would approach a respondent and after greetings and other shared pleasantries, ask a few initial questions to ascertain credibility to participate and then ask for consent and permission to administer the questionnaire. If accepted, the questionnaire was then administered. The respondents were asked to choose the most natural from a set of three sentences. The instruction to the respondent was as follows; *please check the most natural from each set, the one that reflects the way you would say it at home with your children, parents, siblings, etc.* Sample sentence set presented to the respondent is as follows:

5. (a). John gonna be home tonight
   (b). John's gonna be home tonight
   (c). John is gonna be home tonight

6. (a). She working in the city
   (b). She's working in the city
   (c). She is working in the city

6. Participants: Criteria for Selection

This study is focused on the analysis of copula absence; deletion and contraction in the speech of AAVE speakers in Georgia. The research population consists of people who are either born in Georgia or have

lived in Georgia for the past twenty years without any long term stay in any other part of the country in the past twenty years. In addition to this, the respondent must be born in the United States. In all, about 40 participants were surveyed for this study. I tried to sample approximately equal number of males and females and I also made effort to sample equal number of younger people (age 15-30) and older people (age 31 and above). Social class was not considered in this survey.

7. Results

The results of this study are presented and summarized in tables (2) and (3) below. Table (2) presents the survey results on copula contraction while table (3) presents the results of deletion of the copula in AAVE as it is spoken in Georgia.

Table 2: Contraction of *is* and *are* in AAVE in Georgia

Factor group	Constraint	Percentage	Token
Following grammatical	gonna	74%	31
environment	locative	68%	70
	verb + ing	67%	70
	NP	64%	29
	adjective	33%	25
Subject	personal pronoun	70%	165
	other pronoun	69%	36
	noun phrase	53%	86
Following Phonological	___consonant	58%	265
environment	___vowel	64%	89
Preceding Phonological	consonant____	54%	110
environment	vowel_____	63%	111

Factor group	Constraint	Percentage	Token
Age	younger speakers		
	(15-30)	66%	306
	older speakers		
	(31 and above)	28%	43
Total			1578
Overall frequency		61%	

Table 3: Deletion of *is* and *are* in AAVE in Georgia

Factor group	Constraint	Percentage	Token
Following grammatical	gonna	32%	15
environment	adjective	19%	6
	verb + ing	17%	37
	locative	16%	14
	NP	14%	5
Subject	personal pronoun	19%	41
	other pronoun	18%	8
	noun phrase	21%	23
Following Phonological	___consonant	18%	62
environment	___vowel	19%	21
Preceding Phonological	consonant____	24%	35
environment	vowel_____	15%	21
Age	younger speakers		
	(15-30)	20%	81
	older speakers		
	(31 and above)	8%	4
Total			373
Overall frequency		19%	

8. Discussion

In both tables 2 and 3 the first two columns present information about the independent variables namely the structural and social factors while the last two columns present information about the dependent variables namely the pattern of copula contraction and deletion. The first column shows the factor groups and the second column contains the particular constraints that shape the pattern of copula contraction and deletion in the data corpus collected in this study. The fourth column presents the token count of the copula contraction (table 2) and copula deletion (table 3) while the third column presents the percentage rates of occurrence of copula contraction and deletion in particular factor groups and particular constraints. The number on the penultimate row on each table is the total token count of copula contraction (table 2) and copula deletion (table 3) while the number on the last row (61% on table 2 and 19% on table 3) represents the mean collapsed of the percentages of occurrence of the dependent variables in all factor groups and all constraints.

The general picture that emerges from both tables is that contraction has much higher frequency than deletion in all factor groups in both internal environmental constraints and external factor. The overall percentage of contraction (61%) is much higher than the overall percentage of deletion (19%) on both tables. This may be a result of shift in style in response to the perceived formality of the data collection procedure. Speakers tend to have metalinguistic awareness about the formality of any written material. We shall return to this subsequently, but for now let us talk about the table in 2. The information on table 2 pattern, largely, in a similar way with similar tables or analyses of the variable by other analysts. For instance, in Following Grammatical Environment factor group, the table pattern like the table presented by Rickford (1999: 68) as a result of the analyses of the data from East Palo Alto, California. On that table, contraction of the copula is high when following *gonna* (84%) and low when following NP (31%) with verb + ing, locatives and adjectives taking comparable

intermediate hierarchy in that order. In our table and under this factor group, copula contraction is high when following *gonna* (74%) and low when following NP (64%) though this is not as strikingly different as in East Palo Alto case. However, copula contraction in our analysis is very low when following adjective (33%) which has the least percentage of contraction under this factor group. On subject factor group, our analysis also patterns in a similar manner like the analysis in Rickford (1999:68) with high contraction frequency after personal pronouns (70% in our analysis and 78% in Rickford's analysis of East Palo Alto data) and low contraction frequency after noun phrases (53% in our analysis and 31% in Rickford's East Palo Alto data). We notice the closeness in percentages of contraction of the copula as a function of subject factor group for personal pronoun and noun phrase. This may be one of the consequences of the difference in data collection method.

On the Following Phonological Environment, our table shows that copula contraction is high when preceding vowels (64%) and low when preceding consonants (58%). This is also in line with underlying phonological facts as contraction involves the removal of a vowel cluster; a marked feature. The pattern we got is in line with Rickford's analysis- (48% for consonant and 52% for vowel). On the Preceding Phonological Environment, our analysis shows that contraction is high when following vowels (63%) and low when following consonants (54%). This is in line with a study by Labov 1969: 731-746 cited in Rickford 1999:70) on the speech of New York Jets. Labov found out that the copula contraction frequency is high when preceding vowel, a pronoun subject and a following *gonna.*

Though the overall frequency of deletion of the copula in this study is relatively low compared to many other analyses of this same variable by other analysts, the table 3 in our study patterns in a similar manner like the table on deletion of *is* and *are* in Rickford (1999: 69) especially with respect to Following Grammatical Environment, Following Phonological Environment, Preceding Phonological Environment and age.

On the Following Grammatical Environment, our analysis shows that the deletion of copula is high when preceding *gonna* (32%) and low when preceding noun phrase (14%) with following adjective, verb + ing and locative taking intermediate hierarchy in that order. Also, in Rickford's analysis, deletion is high when following *gonna* (81%) and low when following a noun phrase (30%). However, in this case the factors verb + ing comes the next in the hierarchy with (72%) while in our analysis the factor verb + ing ranks third in the hierarchy with (17%) with adjective taking the second position with (19%). Also, in Preceding Phonological environment factor group, our analysis shows that deletion is high when preceded by consonants (24%) and low when preceded by vowels (15%). This is in line with Labov (1969) analysis of the deletion of *is* in AAVE which claims that deletion involves the removal of the sibilant consonant after the initial contraction. (in Labov's framework, deletion is derivational. Every case of deletion has a history of contraction. That is, you can only delete contracted forms).

I return to the issue of the low frequency of deletion in this study in comparison with similar studies by other analysts mentioned in this work. Although I need data from recordings of live speech[1] from this same set of participants to compare with the survey data before I can make any categorical inference about the possible effects of the perceived formality of the medium of communication on style, we can say, tentatively, that medium might have affected the style of response in our data. This is reminiscent of Foxy's case mentioned earlier and reminds me of the case I met in the field while conducting the survey: an AAVE speaker approached and I asked him to participate in the survey and he quickly obliged and

1) I am aware that the use of questionnaire is not the standard way of conducting this kind of research but I believe that it is quite suitable in this case as it has served one of the purposes of this research which is to provide additional information to already existing research results in this area especially as regards how the perceived formality of medium can affect the style of responses to the survey questionnaire.

I handed him the questionnaire. While completing the questionnaire, he stopped and asked me in AAVE: *How many have you did? (asking about how many questionnaires I have administered so far).* But when he handed the questionnaire back to me after completion, I took a quick look at his choices and I was shocked to observe that he chose most full forms in the options. This observation tickles my imagination that perhaps if the choices in the survey questionnaire were between the forms: *How many have you did?* and *How many have you done*, perhaps he would choose the latter.

The two tables in our study show age as a social correlate of the use of contraction and deletion of copula in AAVE. Table 2 shows that younger people strongly favor the contraction of the copula (66%) while older people strongly disfavor the contraction of the copula (28%). In a similar way, table 3 shows that younger people favor the deletion of the copula (20%) while older people disfavor the deletion of the copula (8%). This results is in consonance with the results in similar studies including Rickford (1999:76) who states that "with respect to age, depicted in figure 4.6, both runs show a linear correlation, the youngest speakers strongly favoring deletion, whereas the oldest age group disfavors deletion strongly…". Other work with similar results include; Labov (1969), Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Rickford (1992) and others.

This leads us to the issue of Divergence Hypothesis and Age Grading; two controversial topics in the AAVE literature. Divergence hypothesis champions the idea that the significant age effect on deletion and contraction of the copula and similar effect on other studied features of AAVE is an indication of linguistic change in progress that will eventually lead to more divergence between AAVE and Standard American English (SAE) and other varieties of English. On the other hand, age grading hypothesis champions the idea that the significant effects of age on deletion and contraction of copula and other AAVE features is an indication of the phenomenon of age grading where people tend to speak differently when

they are younger than when they are older (Rickford 1992, 1999). That is, certain features of AAVE would disappear in the speech of speakers as they get older. The line of reasoning put forward by Rickford is based on the data from Foxy which shows that she deleted the copula 90% of the time when she was first interviewed in 1987 having just turned fourteen at that time, but that she deleted the copula 70% of the time when interviewed by the same person and under similar circumstance in 1990.

However, I think that if we look closely at the other side of the coin, we might have some reasons to consider evidence in support of change-in-progress more closely. For instance, Cukor-Avila (2001) has shown that different socio-historical contexts correlate with linguistic differences between AAVE and South White Vernacular English (SWVE) and other varieties. That is, as we stated earlier, the pre-WWII period witnessed significant increase in social contact between African Americans and the White Americans and so there were many shared linguistic features while the post-WWII period saw reduced social contact between this two groups resulting in less linguistic similarities between AAVE and other varieties. Our point is that older people are closer in time to this era of significant social contact between African Americans and European Americans therefore their speech retains the linguistic similarity. On the other hand, lesser social contact with the White coupled with peer pressure against “speaking and acting white” and the need to maintain socio-cultural identity among younger speakers of AAVE lead to more social and structural linguistic divergence between AAVE and SAE and other varieties.

Another line of reasoning that we want to advance in support of the divergence hypothesis is concerned with the drastic decrease in the frequency of Foxy’s contraction and deletion of the copula when she was interviewed by a stranger and the low frequency of copula deletion in our study. We analyze these as indication of the fact that younger speakers of AAVE are conscious of both the linguistic and social differences between AAVE

speakers and speakers of other varieties and consciously make choices regarding which norm to use at which contexts to satisfy their communicative and socio-cultural needs. This sort of conscious social behavior is not likely to disappear with age rather it might increase as a correlate of the perceived physical, socio-cultural and psychological distance between AAVE speakers and speakers of other varieties.

This perceived physical, sociocultural and psychological distance brings to mind the question of possible correlation between such perceived distance and the issue of language in education. Do these perceived distance accessioned by the structural linguistic differences discussed in this paper present social psychological differences among the students who are speakers of AAVE and teachers who are speakers of SAE that may cause pedagogical setbacks for such students in contemporary American schools? The answer to this question is a resounding yes. For instance, Smitherman 2003: 141 reports that:

> Research on language attitudes consistently indicates teachers' believe that Black English-speaking youngsters are non-verbal and possess limited vocabularies. They are perceived to be slow learners or uneducable; their speech is unsystematic and needs constant correction and improvement … These beliefs [are] linguistically untenable. Smitherman 2003:141

In fact, many linguists including Labov 1982, Smitherman 2003, Hall et al 2011 have reported that such students, being bidialectal, have little trouble understanding their teachers although the teachers have claimed otherwise. For example, the pattern of copula deletion and contraction in Foxy's speech provides support for this claim because the drastic decrease in the frequency of copula deletion and contraction in this teenager's speech when she was interviewed by a stranger points to the fact that she is bidialectal and also actively conscious of the social distance and the sociolinguistic differences that exit between herself and the perceived

stranger.

This kind of pedagogic setbacks between the teachers and the students could be remedied by creating a strong connection between the home language or local forms of language and the language of instruction in schools. Resent efforts to create such connection is championed in a research program known as funds of knowledge for teaching (Gonzalez et al. 2005, Smith 2002, Gee 2007 etc.). In this program, teachers are exposed to the neighborhoods where students live and family visits by the teachers help them to explore and understand the areas of everyday knowledge used in the students' homes and to document the language forms and practices that family members engage as they enact these forms of knowledge (Hall et al 2011). This creates a level of confidence and mutual trust among teachers, parents and the students thereby allowing the teachers to tap from the areas of strength accruing to the students due to the funds of knowledge cultivated at home.

9. Conclusion

This study focused on the analysis of the structural and social variables that may correlate with the use of copula contraction and deletion in the speech of African American vernacular English speakers in Georgia. Our analyses show that structural factors such as preceding and following grammatical environments coupled with the preceding and the following phonological environments such as preceding and following vowels and consonants are important factors in determining the pattern of deletion and contraction of the copula. The results show that the overall frequency of contraction is much higher than the overall frequency of deletion in all factor groups including the age of the speakers as a correlate where the data show that younger speakers tend to use copula contraction and deletion more frequently than older speakers. We analyze these as a function

of the fact that younger speakers of AAVE are more conscious of both the linguistic and social differences between AAVE speakers and speakers of other varieties and consciously make choices regarding which norm to use at which contexts to satisfy their communicative and socio-cultural needs. This kind of conscious social behavior has the tendency to create more sociolinguistic divergence among speakers of AAVE, SAE and other varieties.

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Appendix: The Survey Questionnaire

A Survey Questionnaire

on

Contraction and Deletion of Copula in African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

General instruction: (Please answer the questions according to how you would speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) naturally in an informal setting (like at home with your family).

Section A (demographic information)

1 Name ·····

2 Gender (check one): (a) male (b) female

3 City ·····

4 State ·····

5 How long have you lived here?.....years

6 Age (please check one) (a) 15-30 (b) 31-60 (c) 61 and above

7 Highest level of education (please check one)

Elementary school

High school

College-BA/BS

Graduate School

8 Occupation ·····

9 Are you an American? (a) Yes (b) No

Section B (Please check the most natural from each set)

1 i. (a). John gonna be home tonight

(b). John's gonna be home tonight

(c). John is gonna be home tonight

ii. (a). We gonna celebrate the victory

(b). We're gonna celebrate the victory
(c). We are gonna celebrate the victory

2 i. (a). She working in the city
(b). She's working in the city
(c). She is working in the city

ii. (a). They talking nonsense
(b) They're talking nonsense
(c). They are talking nonsense

3 i. (a). John at home now
(b). John's at home now
(c). John is at home now

ii. (a). They at home now
(b). They're at home now
(c). They are at home now

4. i. (a). I don't know whether the bag white or black
(b). I don't know whether the bag's white or black
(c). I don't know whether the bag is white or black

ii. (a). Folks in Atlanta nice people
(b). Folks in Atlanta're nice people
(c). Folks in Atlanta are nice people

5 i. (a). Tomorrow the game in New York
(b). Tomorrow's the game in New York
(c). Tomrrow is the game in New York

ii. (a). They the leaders in the school
(b). They're the leaders in the school
(c). They are the leaders in the school

Section C (Please check the most natural from each set)

1 i. (a). He working in the city
(b). He's working in the city
(c). He is working in the city

ii. (a). They dancing in the yard
(b). They're dancing in the yard
(c). They are dancing in the yard

2 i. (a). Someone knocking on the door
(b). Someone's knocking on the door
(c). Someone is knocking on the door

ii. (a). Everybody coming home tonight
(b). Everybody's coming home tonight
(c). Everybody is coming home tonight

3 i. (a). The dog barking in the yard
(b). The dog's barking in the yard
(c). The dog is barking in the yard

ii. (a). The people happy to visit Athens
(b). The people're happy to visit Athens
(c). The people are happy to visit Athens

Section D (Please check the most natural from each set)

1 i. (a). My dog cute
(b). My dog's cute
(c). My dog is cute

ii. (a). They playing in the yard
(b). They're playing in the yard
(c). They are playing in the yard

2 i. (a). John at home with my maama
(b). John's at home with my maama
(c). John is at home with my maama

ii. (a). The men in the living room
(b). The men're in the sitting room
(c). The men are in the sitting room

Section E (Please check the most natural from the set)

1 i. (a). The cat sitting in my bed
(b). The cat's sitting in my bed
(c). The cat is sitting in my bed
ii. (a). They dancing in the yard
(b). They're dancing in the yards
(c). They are dancing in the yard

2 i. (a). She at home now
(b). She's at home now
(c). She is at home now
ii. (a). John, you in the game tonight.
(b) John, you're in the game tonight
(c). John, you are in the game tonight

Thank you so much for your support