

1. INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE EMERGING AREAS of research in the field of American sociolinguistics is the study of ethnolinguistic boundaries. For some time now, sociolinguistic researchers have examined the extent of language accommodation with respect to various ethnic speech groups, raising important questions about the dynamics of language maintenance and change in American English (e.g., Labov 1969; Wolfram 1974; Bailey and Bassett 1986; Rickford et al. 1991). Such research has additionally incited debate about ethnic language history (e.g., Holm 1976; Baugh 1983; Bailey and Maynor 1987; Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Butters 1989; Fasold 1990; Mufwene 1996; Blake 1997; Weldon 1998) as well as brought forth new perspectives on ethnic group affiliation.

However, the study of ethnolinguistic boundaries in American English has centered primarily on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its relation to mainstream and vernacular Anglo American varieties of English, including Southern English (Wolfram 1974; Fasold 1981; Cukor-Avila and Bailey 1996; Feagin 1997; Bailey and Thomas 1998). While extremely informative, this concentration of research has played into the bias of a bipartite, categorical classification of ethnicity in the United States—that is, that ethnicity is either black or white. Indeed, little research involving the language accommodation of other groups, such as American Indians, has been carried out in the modern development of social dialectology. Notable exceptions, of course, are Leap (1977, 1993), Wolfram et al. (1979), Wolfram (1984), Craig (1991), and Anderson (1998). Moreover, this focus of research, whose purpose has been in part to identify the patterning of ethnically diagnostic linguistic variables, has as a by-product fostered a unilateral, static interpretation of ethnic identity. Again, notable exceptions include Gilbert (1986), Schilling-Estes (1998), Hazen (2000), and Mendoza-Denton (2002).

The purpose of the present study is to expand the sociolinguistic research model by examining ethnic language boundaries as mani-

fested in various uses of the verb *be* in Robeson County, North Carolina, a triethnic community composed of American Indians, African Americans, and Anglo Americans. The goal of this project is to demonstrate that ethnic identity is a dynamic process, manifesting various alignment configurations over time and social space. To this end, this study poses the following empirical questions: (1) How do Lumbee American Indians fit in relation to the other vernacular dialect groups within and outside Robeson County? (2) What is the state of Lumbee English as a language variety? (3) How, why, and in what ways does this variety demonstrate changes over time and space? As will be shown, ethnic groups that have been stripped of their ancestral source language, such as the American Indian group to be studied here, may be quite resilient in the face of such language loss and encroachment, carving out unique and distinct ethnic language varieties in the replacement language.

1.1. THE VARIABLE

The verb *be* is perhaps the most salient indicator of ethnic group affiliation in current sociolinguistic research, particularly with respect to black-white speech relations (Wolfram 1974; Bailey and Bassett 1986; Montgomery 1994; Hazen 1997; Winford 1998). Thus *be* is a logical focal point for examining the nature of ethnolinguistic boundaries in the triethnic community of Robeson County. Among the persistent questions about the structural and functional properties of the verb *be* in the sociolinguistic literature are (1) its grammatical status, including its morphosyntactic patterning (Bernstein 1988; Montgomery and Mishoe 1999) and semantic and pragmatic denotation (Fasold 1969; Bailey and Maynor 1987; Myhill 1988; Green 1995, 1998); (2) its historical derivation in terms of donor language sources (Rickford 1986; Bailey and Maynor 1987; Montgomery and Kirk 1996; Montgomery and Mishoe 1999); and (3) its dynamic status with respect to language change (Bailey and Maynor 1987; Butters 1989; Cukor-Avila and Bailey 1996).

The current investigation, which examines three forms of *be*, including perfective *be*, finite *be(s)*, and null copula, augments previous studies in several ways. First, I focus my analysis of the variable use of *be* in an American Indian variety of English, which will henceforth be referred to as Lumbee English, as compared with local Anglo and African American varieties. In some respects, the Lumbee are in a precarious position as a American Indian people. They are unable to definitively trace themselves back to one particular source ancestral language or tribe (see §2.3.4). Indeed, it is quite possible that the Lumbee are descendants from a multicontact and/or multiethnic situation rather than from a unitary ancestral tribe (Dannenberg and Wolfram 1998; Wolfram et al. 2002). As a result of this sociohistorical circumstance, their ethnic identity as American Indians has been continually questioned, motivating them to carve out a unique niche—culturally and linguistically. To prove that they now occupy such a niche, I examine the structural and functional roles of perfective *be* for this group of speakers. Interestingly, perfective *be* has heretofore not been shown to be indicative of ethnic status; however, for the Lumbee, use of perfective *be* strongly indicates that this feature is correlative with their symbolic ethnic identity within the context of Robeson County. As will be shown, taking into account the beliefs and attitudes of marginalized ethnic groups like the Lumbee about their own language variation augments traditional speech community studies (Mendoza-Denton 2002).

Second, I examine the role that different forms of *be*, especially finite *be(s)* and null copula, play in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries within the county. From the earliest contact in the county area until today, the three ethnic groups in Robeson County have remained separate and distinct in many ways. De facto segregation is still extant in many aspects of the community, including government, schools, and residential life, although the contact relations between the groups must have varied greatly over time and place. In fact, these relations continue to be in flux. African Americans, Anglo Americans, and American Indians in the county have demonstrated various sociocultural alignment configurations at different points in time. I investigate the extent to which *be*

forms in these three ethnic groups' speech reveal the negotiation of ethnolinguistic boundaries over time and social space.

Last, I add to the sociolinguistic literature by evaluating the status of traditional diagnostic variables, such as invariant *be* and null copula, in the identification of ethnic identity. Invariant or finite *be*, typically associated with AAVE, often occurs in the construction *be* + present participle to mark habitual aspect. Under the black-white framework of ethnic language study, no other American English language variety has been shown to use this form, governed by aspectual, pragmatic, and semantic constraints identical to those in AAVE.

Null copula is similarly ethnically marked. High-frequency absence of both singular (other than first person) and plural forms of the copula in hierarchically related grammatical and highly constrained phonological environments is common to AAVE varieties. In other words, the incidence of null copula in AAVE tends to be distinctive from that in Anglo American English varieties in at least three ways. First, the overall rate of null copula is higher for AAVE speakers than it is for comparable Southern Anglo Americans, who speak the language variety commonly used for comparison with AAVE. Second, AAVE speakers have significant incidence of null copula for both *are* and *is* forms (Labov 1969), whereas Anglo American speakers are mostly restricted to null copula for *are* (Wolfram 1974). Finally, AAVE speakers have a predictable hierarchy of variable constraints in which various complements of the copula show a gradual decline from *gonna* to noun phrase (NP) predicate complements, whereas Anglo American speakers have a much less clear-cut status for null copula with various predicate complements (Rickford et al. 1991). At the same time, phonological constraints on null copula tend to work in tandem with the grammatical constraints. In other words, preceding vowel facilitates null copula, thus paralleling the grammatical environment of null copula with a pronoun subject, as most pronouns end with a vowel. Following phonological environment, however, is typically not a strong determining factor for the occurrence of null copula.

For the Lumbee, invariant *be* and null copula are not ethnic markers. Indeed, the empirical analysis of forms of *be* in this study

points out the need for sociolinguistic research on ethnolinguistic boundaries to assess the relevance of conventional ethnic language variables on a case-by-case basis.

1.2. SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this study are based principally upon the analysis of sociolinguistic interviews collected by the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP) from 1994 to 1999.¹ I have been involved in the collection of data for this project since 1995. Supplemental data are extracted from interviews conducted by the Oral History Project at Florida State University and the Adolph Dial Tapes, collected by local historian Adolph Dial. Both the Oral History Project and the Dial interviews were conducted in Robeson County in the early to mid-1970s.

The NCLLP collection consists of interviews with 33 African Americans, 153 American Indians, and 41 Anglo Americans. The interviews were conversational and lasted one to three hours. Participants were both male and female and ranged in age from 10 to 98. The interviews conducted by the staff at the Oral History Project and by Dial were more formal and lasted 10 to 30 minutes. Participants at the time of the interviews ranged in age from 50 to 90. Combining data from these three sources allows for an apparent-time comparison of language variation and change over the last one hundred years.

Participants for the NCLLP data set were selected following the social network model (Milroy 1987). At the same time, however, careful attention was paid to obtaining interviews from roughly equal numbers of males and females from different age groups and ethnicities for cross-gender, cross-generational, interethnic analysis.

The selection of equal numbers of participants based on ethnicity for interethnic analysis, however, raised some interesting challenges. As has been alluded to above and will be explored in much more depth in chapter 2, the Lumbee people have historically been unrecognized by various political factions as well as by other American Indian groups as an American Indian community.

Thus, some American Indians have identified with the other ethnic groups in the county (i.e., African or Anglo American). Another issue is that not all American Indians living in Robeson County identify themselves as Lumbee. Tuscarora, Coharie, and small numbers of Haliwa-Saponi live in the area as well. The question for this study, then, was how to decide which people were “Lumbee.”

Almost exclusively, Robesonians categorized as Lumbee were those who identified themselves as such. As one participant put it in an interview, “We KNOW who we are.” Thus, ethnic identity for the Lumbee is determined not by how others categorize them, but by who they say they are. At the same time, if some participants for this study did not identify themselves as Lumbee but their speech strongly correlated with the general pattern of Lumbee English (cf. chap. 2), then it was utilized as data. For this particular study, there is only one such case. This participant is noted in chapter 3.

With respect to analysis, the techniques for extracted data include quantitative variation analysis, qualitative analysis, and historical investigation into the donor source language varieties that contributed to the dialect configuration of Lumbee English. With respect to the quantitative analysis, I utilize several statistical procedures. First, VARBRUL is used for the null copula data in chapter 5. VARBRUL is a multivariate, probabilistic program designed to weigh the effects of language-internal and extralinguistic constraints on variable speech.² In addition, I use the chi-square procedure, which is a nonparametric test designed to assess the significance of the frequency differences in the distribution of linguistic forms. I apply the chi-square test to the figures for the incidence of perfective *be* in chapter 3 and to the occurrence of *be(s)* in Lumbee English in chapter 4. In the remaining chapters, I supplement these tests by using summary descriptive statistics to illustrate the distribution and structural patterning in terms of linguistic environments for forms of *be*.

With respect to qualitative analysis, this study relies heavily on defining the semantic, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic parameters for each form of *be* analyzed, supplemented by ethnographic information gathered from Robeson County participants by the NCLLP, by Dial, and by the Oral History Project. Historical investi-

gation into the forms of *be* relies in part on data collected for the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* (LAGS 1986–92) as well as on evidence gathered by other linguistic, social, and anthropologically based histories.

1.3. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The chapters that follow demonstrate the continual negotiation and renegotiation of ethnic boundaries for the Lumbee American Indians in Robeson County as manifested by the use of the verb *be*. Ethnic identity for this relatively isolated and historically cohesive people exists on a continuum, reconfiguring over time and social space. Chapter 2 traces the roots of Lumbee English from prehistory to its current configuration. I examine the language of the Lumbee in the context of American Indian languages in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia prior to and after European invasion of the Americas. I next examine Lumbee English in the context of European language varieties spoken in North Carolina after 1500, paying special attention to those varieties which would have had a formative influence on the development of Robeson County English. Last, I examine the sociocultural context of Lumbee English over time. I provide anecdotal and historical documentation of the relative cultural isolation and cohesiveness of the Lumbee community since the early 1700s. I conclude my investigation into the roots of Lumbee English by briefly profiling the present-day dialect configuration of this variety. I offer a comparison of various phonological, lexical, and grammatical features of Lumbee English with those of its local contact varieties (i.e., Robeson County African and Anglo American English) as well as with surrounding vernacular varieties, such as Appalachian and Outer Banks English.

In chapter 3, I examine the perfective uses of *be* in Lumbee English. I begin by offering a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the form, perfective *I'm*, as in *I'm been there* (Wolfram 1996). I demonstrate that perfective uses of *be* are preferred but not restricted to occurrence with first person, which broadens the analysis first issued by Wolfram. I next propose that occurrence of the

perfect forms in simple past contexts are a natural analogical extension of this productive perfect system. I end chapter 3 by discussing other relic forms of *be* and their relation to the perfect in Lumbee English.

Chapter 4 examines the occurrence of the finite *be(s)* in Lumbee English. It is shown that Lumbee English use of *be(s)* aligns with past and present uses of *be* in AAVE and also with surrounding Anglo American varieties of English, such as that spoken in Horry County, South Carolina, a long-standing Anglo American community with ties to Scottish Highlander and Scotch-Irish source language varieties, although *be(s)* in Robeson County Anglo American English is no longer productive. Additionally, *be(s)* for younger Lumbee English speakers is subtly being reconfigured to align with invariant *be* in AAVE, grammaticalized with habitual aspect as *be* + present participle. I argue that the overall use of *be(s)* in Lumbee English has been regrammaticalized, demonstrating that ethnic alignment reconfigures over time and space.

Chapter 5 deals with the incidence of null copula for the three ethnic groups in Robeson County. I present quantitative evidence which illustrates that Anglo American and Lumbee speakers pattern similarly with respect to the overall incidence of null copula and the incidence of null copula for *are*. I also offer data which demonstrate that there is no significant difference for null copula between any of the three ethnic groups with respect to the predicate complements of the copula. At the same time, there appears to be no significant phonological constraint on the occurrence of null copula in Robeson County. I conclude chapter 5 by discussing the dynamic nature of ethnolinguistic boundaries with respect to null copula.

Chapter 6 provides an overall examination of the continual negotiation and renegotiation of ethnic boundaries for the Lumbee American Indians with respect to *be*. I also discuss how traditional variables such as invariant *be* and null copula need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. I conclude this study by addressing important issues that should expand the conventional bipartite template of research of ethnicity and language variation in the field of sociolinguistics.