

OPERATIONALIZING STYLE: QUANTIFYING THE USE OF STYLE SHIFT IN THE SPEECH OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT. The vast majority of research to date on African American Vernacular English style shift has taken the form of qualitative analyses of individual case studies; however, despite its great success, in focusing on individual rather than group style and style shifting, such work by itself is unable to answer key questions about style and style shift at the level of social groups, communities of practice, and broader based communities. Recent quantitative analyses, such as Craig and Washington's (2006) Dialect Density Measure (DDM), have sought to capture stylistic variation at the group level by analyzing dozens of linguistic features meant to represent a dialect, but use of such large numbers of features severely restricts the types of statistical analyses that can be applied to a given data set and therefore limits the utility of the technique. To test whether a smaller subset of features can be used to quantify stylistic variation, we analyzed a sample of 108 sixth-grade students observed in two conditions that differed in formality. Three measures were used to track changes in style, two large-scale DDMs constructed from a set of more than 40 variables and a subset measure that used only 6 variables. Analyses indicate that the larger DDMs were highly correlated with the subset measure, thus indicating that a small number of features can be used to reliably reflect shifting styles.

THE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE is to add to the current understanding of how African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers shift their speech styles in relation to situational context. We wish to make explicit the underlying assumption that AAVE speakers are often thought of and, more importantly, often think of themselves as a group. Thus, we expect that AAVE speakers share to some degree a set of common practices when it comes to their style-shifting. In light of this assumption, we propose a set of quantitative methods controlled for and applied to groups to capture these practices.

In focusing on group rather than individual style shifting, this work shares the aims of many of the earliest studies of stylistic variation, which themselves sought to identify and to some degree explain group rather than individual

patterns of variation (Labov 1966; Guy 1980). Operating in this tradition, the present study is meant to complement more recent research on style which has, in contrast, focused almost exclusively on single case studies. There are at least two reasons for the current trend toward studying style qualitatively at the level of the individual. First, quantitative methods, like those advocated here, are admittedly limited in what they can reveal. For instance, they have little to say in current debates over whether style shifting is mostly a reactive phenomenon, conditioned by and not just related to differences in context, or whether, as numerous authors maintain, it is a more proactive crafting of identity. Coupland (forthcoming) and others (Schilling-Estes 2004; Moore and Podesva 2009) argue that answers to such questions concerning why people style shift can be found only through the detailed analysis of how people use linguistic features in unfolding discourse; therefore, style shifting should be studied through the qualitative analysis of case studies.

While they undoubtedly provide invaluable information, case studies fail to answer key questions about style shift in populations, questions that not only have theoretical interest, but also affect practical matters. One reason for the increased interest in style shift among AAVE speakers is that it has been suggested that the ability to style shift from AAVE to the educational standard is an important academic skill for African American students and that the inability of many African American students to do so may contribute to the current black-white academic achievement gap. To investigate this and other possible ramifications of style shift, one must be able to examine style shift at the level of social groups, communities of practice, and broader based communities. Their limitations notwithstanding, here more quantitative methods are particularly useful. In the end, both methodologies contribute something important to the study of style shift.

A second reason that current methods of studying style shift have been largely limited to studying individuals rather than entire groups stems from the difficulty involved in individuating dialects such as AAVE. The basic problem is this: if dialects are not (and perhaps cannot) be clearly defined, which linguistic features should be observed to identify dialectal shifts? Monitoring too large a number of features only muddies the waters, rendering most statistical techniques ineffectual. While we do not advance any new definition of AAVE in this paper, we outline how the issue of definition has shaped the study of AAVE style shift and influences the design of the methods we put forward. Thus, this study unites two traditionally elusive themes in the study of AAVE, namely, its operational definition and contextually based shifts in its use.

Despite the countless descriptions of the linguistic traits associated with African American speech, there has been little discussion of what the precise linguistic parameters define AAVE as a variety. Operationally, it appears fea-

sible to simply describe features associated with African American speakers and to assume that these features are integral to the definition of a largely unitary variety. The question of defining the essential and/or exclusive sets of AAVE traits is, however, a much more challenging pursuit, both descriptively and theoretically. This definitional issue has haunted AAVE for as long as linguists have attempted to describe it. However, the definitional dilemma in determining the parameters of a language variety is hardly unique to AAVE; in fact, it is relatively common to confront definitional ambiguity and vagueness in delimiting languages and varieties.

Within the field of linguistics, there is a long tradition of discussion and debate over the seemingly fundamental question of what exactly constitutes a language or a dialect of a language. A significant part of the American structuralist program, for example, involved attempting to rework traditional notions of these terms into sets of theoretically defensible definitions and, wherever possible, going further by providing an operational basis for using those definitions. The lack of success of these and other efforts to find workable definitions, however, has led the majority of linguists to conclude, along with Chambers and Trudgill (1980, 5), that the concept of “a ‘language’ is not a particularly linguistic notion at all.”

Building on the work of German linguist Heinz Kloss (1967) and his distinction between *Ausbau* languages (closely related languages that are often mutually intelligible) and *Abstand* languages (language structurally so dissimilar that they are not mutually intelligible), Fasold (2004) highlights what is generally seen as the chief impediment to arriving at strict definitions of language and associated terms: the “commonsense,” everyday notion of a language that we would wish to refine is a mixed bag. It is partly structural and partly sociopolitical, each arena (the *Ausbau* and the *Abstand* in Kloss’s terminology) prescribing its own criteria for defining languages, with the two different types of criteria failing to converge on any one “thing” that one might call a language or dialect. Not even the commonly used criterion of mutual intelligibility is able to reveal a common ground and reliably individuate languages. The well-known cases of German and the Scandinavian languages, among others, show that intelligibility between language varieties is not always mutual and that often sociopolitical considerations are at odds with structural similarities, creating asymmetries in understanding.

In response to this heterogeneous mixture of language-defining criteria, one branch of linguistics has focused on the formal properties of language, adopting the stance advocated by Chomsky (1980, 1986) that linguistics is not the study of languages but the study of grammars, the sets of organizing principles that govern language structure. Another branch of linguistics spearheaded by Labov (1966, 2001) has, with a different set of goals, focused on language in society, acknowledging the epiphenomenal nature

of languages and dialects, while simultaneously recognizing that as speakers communicate on these and more fine-grained sociolinguistic levels, examining the interactions among the formal and more sociocultural properties of language is necessary to understand many important aspects of language variation and change.

Because it calls attention to potentially important correlations between variation in linguistic structures and changes in sociocultural conditions, the study of style (i.e., speakers' conscious and unconscious use of linguistic structures to situate themselves with respect to others and to express identity) plays an important role in sociolinguistic research. Like languages and dialects, individual styles also resist clear definition. Rather than focus on defining styles, researchers have instead focused on identifying style shift, noting changes in linguistic features that speakers use in response to various social conditions that are thought to determine style. While this focus on style shift avoids directly defining styles, it does not evade the issue completely. The question of which linguistic features to look to as indicators of a shift remains a practical research matter. Initial notions of what defines a style (or dialect or language) play an important role in guiding research on intraspeaker language variation though it may not be explicitly recognized. For example, the study of style shift among speakers of AAVE demands some sense of what constitutes AAVE and how the selected linguistic variations for measuring variation are representative of this variety.

In the face of this definitional challenge, researchers have tended to cast their nets broadly, examining large numbers of linguistic features that are thought to be a part of AAVE. This has, in turn, led to other methodological consequences, including limiting the range of statistical options available for studying patterns of variation at the level of the dialect. Instead, most work on AAVE style shifting, like most work on style shift generally, has focused on case studies or small numbers of speakers in relatively uncontrolled, natural situations rather than under experimental conditions. Typically, a single AAVE-speaking subject is monitored for possible changes among a large number of features (e.g., Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994; Weldon 2004; Kendall and Wolfram 2009). This is despite great interest in AAVE speakers as a group.

As noted, in this study we use quantitative methods controlled for and applied to groups rather than the individual to better ascertain how AAVE speakers shift their speech styles related to situational context. The method we employ identifies style shift by tracking the use or nonuse of a carefully selected subset of AAVE features in the speech of a group of African American youth in different situations. Two separate measures, both made up of a broad-based inventory of AAVE structures, are used for comparison and to establish the efficacy of the subset measure, rather than as a single summary

variable meant to identify shift by capturing any feature that could arguably be considered characteristic of AAVE. Building on knowledge acquired through methods like Craig and Washington's (2006) Dialect Density Measure that look at a large set of AAVE linguistic features, this approach provides researchers with an opportunity to better describe and understand style shifting at the population level by widening the range of statistical analysis methods that can be applied to the endeavor. At the same time, it allows for a narrower, more detailed focus on the subsets and individual features that seem to be included in that shift.

ISSUES IN CHARACTERIZING AAVE

In many respects, the steadily increasing interest in AAVE has helped fuel the growth of sociolinguistics. One reason for this interest is a growing awareness of the role that vernacular plays in the African American community. Not only is AAVE an important indicator of identity and group membership, but, often as a result, it figures prominently in discussions of social and educational issues such as employment and academic achievement. As alluded to earlier, research shows high AAVE use is correlated with low academic achievement (e.g., Craig, Connor, and Washington 2003; Craig and Washington 2004), and it has been suggested that speakers' use of AAVE may play a role in the academic achievement gap between African American students and their white peers. The relative effect of social demographic factors versus structural linguistic factors is a matter of great debate. What is clear, however, is that as researchers attempt to better understand these and other issues regarding AAVE, current methods of studying populations of speakers must continue to be refined and expanded. To further the investigation of the many issues surrounding AAVE, a number of more fundamental matters first must be addressed, including the best way to characterize AAVE and, given a characterization, how to accurately and reliably measure a speaker's level of dialect use.

It is well documented that speech patterns in African American communities tend to differ from those of European American communities. Early descriptive work by Labov et al. (1968) and Fasold and Wolfram (1970) noted that despite regional differences these patterns tend to share enough of a resemblance in terms of both linguistic structure and social use to be included under the rubric of African American English in the sociolinguistic literature.¹ More recent work by Rickford (1999) provides a list of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that are common to AAVE, and an even more detailed account of the attributes typical of AAVE speakers is provided by Green (2002). Green gives in-depth specifications of

lexical, semantic, syntactic, morphosyntactic, and phonological properties characteristic of AAVE. Despite the work of these and other linguists, like any other language or dialect, AAVE resists strict definition. There is a great deal of truth in the words of Strang (1970, 227), who stated that “dialects are artifacts, fictitious entities invented by speakers, in which, for limited purposes, linguists suspend disbelief.” This is not to say that the concept of a dialect is not a useful or important one; it is only to say that linguists must be clear about the purposes to which they put it.

One problem of distinguishing and analyzing AAVE as its own entity is that most of an AAVE speaker’s speech overlaps greatly with that of speakers of standard American English and other varieties of English. In Craig and Washington’s (2004) study of school-age children, for instance, the child with the most vernacular speech style used only one AAVE feature per 2.3 words.² Thus, more than half of that child’s speech consisted of forms that are shared with other English varieties. In their 1981 study, Seymour and Seymour report noticeable phonological contrasts in these two dialect groups. They note, however, that many differences could be attributed to incomplete language development rather than dialect differences, since “unique error types were not exclusively characteristic of either group” (274). Although obvious contrasts in these studies show that for various purposes AAVE and standard English may be thought of as discrete varieties of English, they also highlight the considerable overlap between them.

Additionally, many distinguishing features of AAVE are characteristic of other regionalized or socially stratified varieties of English. Comparisons with European Americans who utilize a regional Southern dialect are of particular interest, as the degree of similarity between “black speech” and “white speech” is greatest in the Southern United States. For example, double modals such as *might could* and the use of an auxiliary like the preverbal *done* construction in sentences such as *John done gone to the store* are common to Southern vernaculars and AAVE (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Most of these “shared” features, however, are found more frequently in AAVE or occur in a wider range of linguistic environments in the speech of African Americans (Rickford 1999).

Another problem is that although in practice AAVE is often treated as a unitary dialect, it is well known that, like any other language or dialect, it varies depending on region, age, gender, and individual speaker characteristics. While a core set of features may distinguish AAVE from other language varieties, AAVE speakers can often be identified as hailing from certain areas of the United States based on regional influences. For example, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006) note the existence of regional AAVE varieties such as Northern metropolitan, Southern rural, South Atlantic coastal, and Gulf region.

Other factors, such as gender, have been found to affect variability in AAVE use. Most investigations of AAVE, such as Wolfram (1969), suggest that men use higher levels of AAVE features than women. His study of third-person singular *-s* absence in Detroit, for example, indicated that working-class men tended to use the vernacular form significantly more frequently than women. There is, however, a great deal of individual variation, as shown by Rickford (1992), who found higher incidences of this feature in the speech of two women in East Palo Alto than any of their male counterparts, demonstrating the unpredictability of language use.

Still other studies show the importance of membership in social networks and communities of practice in a speaker's level of AAVE use. Malinson and Childs (2007) examined a rural Appalachian community where African American women were divided into two social groups, the "porch sitters" and the "church ladies." Each group used a particular speech style that indicated their social ties, their group and individual identities, and their orientation toward their local community. The language of the first group, the "porch sitters," contained a large proportion of AAVE features, while the "church ladies" utilized more standard and regional Appalachian characteristics in their speech. These differences demonstrate the importance of social associations in the amount and type of vernacular employed by a speaker. If there is indeed a homogeneous core in AAVE, it obviously is highly nuanced and more of a convenient, politically based fiction than a rigorous linguistic construct. In fact, in line with Lippi-Green (1997), Wolfram (2007) observes that the notion of a unitary, homogeneous variety of AAVE is a bit of sociolinguistic folklore: it is a kind of strategic essentialism in the sense of Spivak (1988). That is, African Americans temporarily forgo variation to highlight their commonality, as well as to combat popular interpretations of their speech patterns in terms of the principle of linguistic subordination, whereby language varieties associated with socially subordinate groups are viewed as linguistic deficits rather than neutral linguistic differences (Lippi-Green 1997).

THE STUDY OF STYLE

Against a backdrop of studies on dialectal difference and its meaning, many scholars have worked to develop a better understanding of intraspeaker style and its role in language variation. The Attention to Speech model (Labov 1972), the Audience Design model (Bell 1984), and the Speaker Design approach (e.g., Schilling-Estes 1998; Eckert 2000; Coupland 2007) are three major theories that have been used to explain self-stylization. While these theories all offer useful insight into speakers' use of style, they are not meant

as models of style itself, but of the underlying conditions and attitudes that produce style shift. For example, the works of Bell (1984, 2001) and Preston (1991) looked at the influence of social differences on language use, finding that range of linguistic variation in style within a given social group was smaller than the scope of their social differences. By focusing on the more concrete behavior of style shifting, it is possible to avoid the potentially impossible task of defining and explaining style while still seeing it at work.

The Attention to Speech model proposed by Labov (1966) marked the first major account of speakers' ability to modify their speech styles. Originally intended to identify conditions under which speakers produce their most vernacular style, this model contrasts speakers' use of "casual" and "careful" speech. In his model, Labov defines casual speech as "the everyday speech used in informal situations where no attention is directed to language" (92), while careful speech is more self-conscious, often altered as a result of the presence of an interviewer or for some other reason (100). These two speech types are revealed by paralinguistic cues such as differences in tempo, pitch, volume, and breathing as well as by the use of laughter in conversation. Labov's initial investigations of style were conducted using sociolinguistic interviews, which specifically attempted to elicit the two speech types by effecting particular speech conditions during the interview. A key finding of that work was that in a more formal situation like an interview, speakers use fewer vernacular features presumably because they are paying closer attention to their speech. Labov's original intent notwithstanding, the Attention to Speech model has long served as the basis for a great deal of work that focuses on the process of style shifting itself. The relative formality of circumstances of speech is often viewed as a primary trigger for style shifting.

A different explanation of style shifting was proposed by Bell (1984). Building upon Street and Giles's (1982) notion of a speech accommodation model, he suggested that speakers adjust their speech to win the approval of other members of the conversation. Unlike Labov's model, this Audience Design approach focuses on others, both participants and nonparticipants (e.g., auditors or eavesdroppers) in the conversation, as the principal catalyst of style shifting. In this view, both the speaker and the interlocutor play an integral role in contributing to style.

More recent work has continued to build on the notion of speech conditions (which include the participants involved) as an impetus for style shifting. Finegan and Biber (1994) found "systematic patterns of register variation and social dialect variation," which were related to the linguistic environment, speaker demographics and characteristics, and the situation of use (315). Ervin-Tripp (2001) adds to their work, indicating that particular circumstances, such as speech versus writing, planned versus unplanned speech, and face-to-face conversation versus a speech presented to a group

of people, trigger style shifts among all monolinguals. For example, style shift has been noted to occur in response to a speaker's conversational partner. Speakers tend to be less self-conscious and therefore use more "regular" or vernacular speech with addressees whom they consider peers or who are familiar to them.³ Reminiscent of Labov's Attention to Speech model and his distinction between formal and informal context, Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) argue that these significant shifts are not due to accommodation alone because they reflect the social characteristics of addressees rather than their linguistic behavior. In addition to influences, discussion topic may impact speech style. Using an interview situation to hold the speech conditions constant, studies by Labov (2001) looked at how the interviewer's manipulation of topic resulted in changes in the interviewees' vernacular use. In response to more typical interview questions about the interviewee's background, subjects used more careful speech; when the interviewer directed the conversation toward topics that were of "maximal interest and emotional involvement" to the subject, more casual speech was used.

A still more recent attempt at explaining style is the Speaker Design approach, which successfully addresses factors not fully brought to the fore by the Attention to Speech and Audience Design scenarios. While researchers like Bell (1997), using the notion of initiative style shift, have long recognized that speakers can and do shift styles to alter existing situations through the crafting of their own identities, proponents of the Speaker Design model (e.g., Schilling-Estes 2004; Coupland 2007) believe that the speaker's identity and relationships with interlocutors are the prime motivators of shifts in speech style. Unlike the other theories, the Speaker Design approach focuses on the speakers themselves rather than outside influences as the reason for change. This model hypothesizes that in choosing to use or exclude certain linguistic features, speakers indicate group membership and personal identity. Thus, a speaker's style is the consequence of his or her own choices in seeking to promote a particular persona. For example, Coupland's (1984) case study of a Welsh travel assistant found that she closely matched her clients' use of several phonological variables, in spite of the fact that her interlocutors varied widely in their degree of standardness. Rather than attributing this merely to accommodation, he argues that she is asserting an identity, stating:

Sue is NOT attempting to reproduce the actual levels of standardness for particular variables that she detects in the speech of her interlocutors; rather she is attempting to convey via her pronunciation and presumably other behaviors, verbal and nonverbal, a *persona* which is similar to that conveyed by her interlocutors. [1984, 65]

Similarly, Schilling-Estes's (2004) North Carolina study compares how African Americans and Lumbee Indians vary their use of certain linguistic markers in response to the ethnic identity they are putting forth. Both the

Lumbee speaker and the African American speaker she analyzed used features that highlighted their ethnicity when discussing topics like race relations, but used such features considerably less frequently when discussing more impersonal topics. Thus, each speaker used language as a way of reflecting his personal identity.

Each of these theories illustrates a major tack that has been taken in the study of style shift. Although each contributes important ideas about style shift that are neglected by its competitors, no one theory seems to completely capture the full richness of the phenomenon. Rather than indicating a weakness in any of the core ideas these theories are built on, this perhaps suggests that no single theory is capable of capturing the complex nature of style and style shift. It is certainly clear that the context, the audience, and the speaker's individual, interpersonal, and group identities all have an impact on stylistic choices. It is equally clear that by noting when and how speakers change their speech, linguists have been able to better understand style, despite the fact that individual styles are elusive if one attempts to define them in a rigorous, unitary, and theoretically defensible way.

QUANTIFYING THE USE OF A LANGUAGE VARIETY

Although the application of quantitative analysis techniques to the study of language variation and style has been extensive, it has largely been restricted to a focus on individual variables rather than composite metrics of dialect use. The literature consists mainly of case studies of individuals and analysis of individual variables. While these approaches identify important linguistic behaviors, conclusions are difficult to extrapolate to composite dialects for larger populations. If we want to capture generalizations about AAVE speakers as a group and not simply as individuals, then some sort of composite measure is needed as way of identifying that group.

Historically, there have been three primary methods applied to the assessment of composite dialect use (Oetting and McDonald 2002). The first is the use of listener judgments to assess dialect. This method provides listeners, either expert sociolinguistic judges or naive language judges from representative populations of speakers, with speech samples and asks them to assess speaker characteristics such as age, ethnicity, region, and community. Despite minimal training and often very short speech samples, listeners' responses tend to be quite reliable using this technique. A second quantitative approach is a type-based method, where researchers look for language patterns that they consider characteristic of a given language variety; if a given speaker utilizes a predetermined number of the selected patterns, he or she is classified as a speaker of that dialect. For example, Smith, Lee, and

McDade (2001, 150) classified subjects as AAVE speakers if they produced at least five nonmainstream AAVE patterns. Finally, token-based methods have been used to attain information about a speaker's dialect type and degree of use. These approaches involve counting the number of utterances or words that contain a nonstandard feature and dividing them by the total number of utterances or words in the speech sample; thus, researchers are able to look at dialect as a continuum ranging from light to heavy use, rather than merely specifying a cutoff value that categorizes speakers as dialect using or not.

One of the more prevalent token-based methods used in the field of speech-language pathology is the Dialect Density Measure (DDM) (Craig, Washington, and Thompson-Porter 1998; Craig and Washington 2004). This instrument was developed specifically to gauge a speaker's composite use of AAVE. The Craig and Washington (2006) DDM uses a predetermined list of features based on the descriptive literature of AAVE (e.g. Fasold and Wolfram 1970; Labov 1972; Rickford 1999; Green 2002), calculates the total number of features that occur in a speech sample, and divides that total by the number of utterances in the sample.⁴ In this way it accounts for the fact that an utterance may contain more than one AAVE feature. Because young children's utterances are much shorter than those of older children and adults, they also compute the total number of features divided by the total number of words.

A number of patterns in the vernacular use of African Americans have been identified using Craig and Washington's DDM. In Craig and Washington's (2004) study of school-age children, there were two very clear changes in vernacular use based upon age. Comparisons of different community types also demonstrated significant differences. Studies found that African Americans in a "mid-size central city" utilized AAVE features half as often as those from an "urban-fringe community"⁵ (Craig and Washington 2004; Thompson, Craig, and Washington 2004). Finally, differences in AAVE use due to situational context have been revealed using a DDM. In studies of younger children, it was determined that AAVE features were used much more frequently in situations where the children spontaneously described pictures versus when they either read standard English text aloud or wrote a story (Craig and Washington 2004; Thompson, Craig, and Washington 2004). These examples illustrate the assorted ways that DDMs have been used to quantify AAVE production.

Such measures, however, have numerous restrictions as well, restrictions that challenge their definitional and operational efficacy. First, the justification for including or excluding structures from a comprehensive measure is not always straightforward and consensual. As discussed above, there is much debate and little consensus about which features best characterize AAVE and if all features are equally weighted in the definition of AAVE, to say nothing

of the overlap between many features of AAVE and other vernacular varieties. Thus, it is not clear that the Craig and Washington DDM nor any similar measure could truly be considered all inclusive or efficiently predictive. Additionally, the kinds of statistical analyses that can be undertaken with a measure containing dozens of features are extremely limited. Performing an exploratory factor analysis on a large number of features can easily require such large sample sizes as to make a linguistic study impractical. Although there is much debate in the field of statistics regarding the minimal sample size required for an exploratory factor analysis, MacCallum et al. (2001) suggest that when the amount of variance explained by common factors is low, a subjects-to-variables ratio as large as 20:1 might be necessary for a stable solution. Thus, a study that uses only 30 linguistic variables, would call for a sample size of 600 participants, a number that would be extremely difficult to recruit for any kind of in-depth or longitudinal language study. Finally, measures that conflate an assortment of features calculate a unitary score that pays attention only to the speaker's overall vernacular use. While this methodology might indicate that a shift has taken place, combining all the vernacular features glosses over the disproportionately larger role that certain features have during style shift. In the process, a great deal of information about language and style use, as well as how particular features are used strategically in interaction, is missed with such measures.

One way to combat the difficulties that accompany such large-scale quantitative measures is to take a more narrow approach and focus on only a few linguistic features. By choosing a subset of features, measures like the six-feature subset AAVE measure advocated, developed, and used in this study, it may be possible to avoid some of the difficulties of trying to define AAVE as a language variety while increasing the operational statistical possibilities for studying style. By focusing on a handful of features culled from a larger set, there is less need to argue over how AAVE should be characterized as a dialect. Instead of dealing with this problematic objective, one can focus only on the features that are the most responsive to context, gender, and other factors. Also, a measure utilizing a smaller number of features greatly increases one's analytical options. The reduced number of variables allows for the application of factor analysis and other types of structural equation modeling techniques. Measures that include dozens of features are often limited to rudimentary analysis methodologies such as *t*-tests and chi-square tests, thereby limiting the information that can be attained. Additionally, this subset method can be used to highlight those particular features that shift under particular conditions. If one is interested in which features shift as a result of the formality of a given situation, the researcher might identify several features that potentially play a prominent role in this linguistic

behavior by noting those that seem to exhibit the greatest variation in usage across contexts.

Importantly, this technique builds on the information provided by large-scale instruments like the DDM. In the case study presented in this article, the DDM is used to suggest which features are worth considering, and its feature list is subsequently pared down to a minimally adequate subset. A close examination of what such subset features have in common may result in a better understanding of what speakers are doing linguistically when they engage in style shifting. By paying closer attention to how speakers use features within sets, it may be possible to attain a better understanding of style. Additionally, large-scale measures like the DDM are important as a way to test the validity of a selected subset. A high correlation between a large-scale measure and a subset of features would lend credence to the use of the selected features. The remainder of this article describes how the DDM and the subset technique were used in a study of contextual style shifting among African American adolescents.

STYLE SHIFTING AND AAVE

This analysis uses data from a study of 108 typically developing African American boys and girls from lower and middle socioeconomic status homes who were 11–13 years of age at the time of observation (Renn 2007). Half of the study participants were enrolled as infants and have since participated in a longitudinal study of AAVE and its relation to literacy skills in early adolescence (Roberts et al. 1995); the other half were recruited at grade 6 as friends of current study subjects, specifically to create a peer-to-peer environment. The study examines the use of AAVE structures in two formal and two informal peer contexts to determine which features are most affected by the formality of the situation. The formal contexts included two speeches, one in which the youth were asked to simulate a speech to a group of parents about their school and one in which they presented a “kids-only” vacation plan to an imaginary audience. The informal contexts involved a discussion between the subjects about problems or issues they selected and a free talk period while eating a snack.

For each subject, 50 utterances from each context were analyzed in terms of 40 morphosyntactic and 3 phonological features. The list of morphosyntactic features includes all of those listed in Craig and Washington’s (2006) DDM as well as six additional features. We thus have two types of DDM measures, the one offered by Craig and Washington (2006) and a revised and extended DDM constructed by Wolfram and Terry. Morphosyntactic features

used by Craig and Washington (2006) included copula absence (e.g., *He nice* for *He is nice*), invariant *be* (e.g., *They be messing up* indicating a habitual behavior or occurrence), and third-person singular *-s* absence (e.g., *She like me* for *She likes me*). Additional morphosyntactic features were selected through consultation with various sources, including Rickford (1999), Green (2002), and Wolfram and Adger's (1993) Dialect Profile Form from the Baltimore city school district.⁶ Only three of the phonological features from the DDM were retained in this study. The selected phonological features were nasal fronting, in which /n/ is used for /ŋ/ in unstressed *-ing* forms (e.g., *swimmin'* for *swimming*); prevocalic cluster reduction, where a word-final consonant cluster is reduced when followed by a vowel (e.g., *bes' apple* for *best apple*); and labialization, where /f/ is substituted for /θ/ (e.g., /maʊf/ for *mouth*) or /v/ is substituted for /ð/ (e.g., /ɔvə/ for *other*). These particular phonological features were chosen because they have been shown in various studies to be particularly prevalent in style shifting (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994; Labov 2001). By the same token, the preponderance of morphosyntactic variables over phonological ones in the dialect profile is justified by the observation that morphosyntactic features generally play a more salient role in distinguishing standard from nonstandard dialect forms (Wolfram 1970; Wolfram and Fasold 1974).

Additionally, some features that are combined in the Craig and Washington DDM were separated into individual features in these analyses. For example, while the Craig and Washington measure combines all forms of subject-verb agreement, the extended DDM measure separates this feature into four specific categories: addition of inflectional *-s* on non-third-person singular subjects, absence of third-person singular *-s*, generalization of *is* and *was*, and difference in number between the subject and the modal auxiliaries *do* and *have*. Separating certain features into more specific classes allows one to better understand what exactly occurs during style shifting.⁷ Additionally, some of the features that are conflated by Craig and Washington may be different enough to show very dissimilar patterning in their distribution. For example, the absence of the possessive marker *'s* on a noun is a very different process from substituting a nominative or objective case pronoun for a possessive pronoun (e.g., *kids just going to walk to THEY school*). Variables can also be examined in terms of differential social marking. Nasal *-ing* fronting (e.g., *runnin'* for *running*), for instance, is a generic diagnostic feature of all varieties of American English, whereas third-person *-s* absence (e.g., *go* for *goes*) is largely restricted to AAVE in the United States. By separating such features, we are then not only able to look at them individually, but also have the option of conflating them if desired.

Three summary measures were used and compared in this study. For each measure, the total number of instances of certain AAVE features was

counted. As previously noted, the features that were studied in this project were initially based on those that were used by Craig and Washington (2006). Each of the measures, however, differed from the others in important and conscientiously designed ways.

The first of the summary measures was the reduced version of the Craig and Washington measure (CW measure). This measure had the advantage of being the closest match to the Craig and Washington method, which is currently used regularly in dialect research in speech-language pathology. Thus, it was considered the “benchmark” measure against which to compare the other measures. Drawbacks to this measure included the exclusion of other potentially relevant vernacular features and the limitations on statistical analysis that accompany such a large number of variables. The second measure (full measure) was thus created to include other potentially relevant AAVE, while the third measure (subset measure) attended to the statistical limitations.

The full measure included all of the features of the CW measure as well as the six additional morphosyntactic features. This measure was created in order to look at the possible contributions of certain morphosyntactic features that were not included by Craig and Washington. The hope was that if any of these additional vernacular features did play a role in style shift, this measure would unearth them. Thus, this was the most comprehensive measure of the three and the one considered to have more content validity. Including even more variables in this measure, however, exacerbated the problem of reducing the number of available statistical analysis techniques.

The subset measure consisted of a subset of six AAVE features. The six features were selected because they seemed to be the most sensitive to changes in formal-informal context change used in the experiment. This determination was made based on data comparing the means of each AAVE feature by context. Table 1 lists the six features used in this measure, as well as examples of each.

Each of these measures was calculated in two ways: once as a proportion of AAVE features over the total number of words and once as a proportion

TABLE 1
AAVE Features Comprising Subset Measure

| <i>AAVE Feature</i> | <i>Example</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Nasal fronting | <i>swimmin' for swimming</i> |
| Copula absence | <i>He nice for He's nice</i> |
| Modal auxiliary absence | <i>How you do this? for How do you do this?</i> |
| Third-person singular -s absence | <i>She like him for She likes him</i> |
| Multiple negation | <i>They didn't do nothing</i> |
| <i>Ain't for Is not</i> | <i>The cars ain't gonna move</i> |

of features over the total number of utterances. Both calculations were performed because each method was imperfect but had its advantages. The total number of words was used in the first approach because there was a context-based imbalance in the number of words per utterance; the mean number of words per utterance was 10.02 in the formal contexts and 5.92 in the informal contexts. This discrepancy meant that in each formal utterance there were nearly twice as many opportunities for a vernacular feature to occur. Some features, like multiple negation or negative concord, require the existence of a multiword utterance to be realized, however. Thus, the total number of utterances was used as the other calculation method. This method is also the standard system used by researchers like Craig and Washington (2006). Therefore, calculating the summary variables in this way allowed for more opportunity for direct comparison with other measures. Using both methods allowed for the detection of patterns that were strong enough to be seen using all of the summary variables.

Correlations among the three measures were calculated to determine how they compared to one another, using the Pearson r test. This was done both for the measures that were calculated as a proportion of the total number of utterances (see table 2) and for those calculated as a proportion of the total number of words (see table 3). Interestingly, the correlations in tables 2 and 3 were essentially identical, suggesting that the method of calculation is fairly inconsequential.

The near-perfect correlation ($r = .99$) between the full and CW measures supports the validity of the CW instrument as an indicator of AAVE use. Although the full measure might arguably be considered a more accurate rendering of AAVE in terms of its linguistic validity, the additional features

TABLE 2
Correlations of Summary Measures Calculated as a Proportion of Total Utterances

| <i>Summary Measure</i> | <i>Subset Measure</i> | <i>Full Measure</i> | <i>CW Measure</i> |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Subset measure | 1.00 | | |
| Full measure | 0.94 | 1.00 | |
| CW measure | 0.94 | 0.99 | 1.00 |

TABLE 3
Correlations of Summary Measures Calculated as a Proportion of Total Words

| <i>Summary Measure</i> | <i>Subset Measure</i> | <i>Full Measure</i> | <i>CW Measure</i> |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Subset measure | 1.00 | | |
| Full measure | 0.94 | 1.00 | |
| CW measure | 0.94 | 0.99 | 1.00 |

and reclassification of features have little effect on the overall assessment of speakers' vernacular use. This suggests that not only is the Craig and Washington DDM a reasonable measure of AAVE use, but the effect of reducing the number of vernacular features included in a summary variable has a surprisingly small effect on its efficacy as well.

Correlations between the subset measure and the more comprehensive measure support the utility of using a carefully selected subset of features. As shown in both cases, there was a very strong positive correlation between the subset measure and the larger measures ($r = .94$). This means that despite the fact that the subset measure contains a small fraction of the features included in formulating the other measures, it did a very good job of capturing the degree to which subjects used AAVE forms. Given the drawbacks of using a measure with a large number of variables, this finding is extremely promising.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the measure put forth in this study is tailored to identify style shifting based on differences in the formality of a given situation; thus, the features that were selected for the subset measure were chosen because of their apparent sensitivity to context. This technique might be implemented to address other questions, like differences based on gender and socioeconomic status. As discussed earlier, numerous factors can play a role in language use. The literature on language variation suggests that different features vary due to these factors. Thus, distinct subsets might be created for use with these different factors. This view contrasts with the objectives of many conducting vernacular research in the field of speech pathology, where the focus is often on trying to find one statistical measure to account for all vernacular use. There is no reason, however, to be limited to one overall diagnostic measure. Indeed, because of its inherent limitations, an all-compassing measure may not provide the same quality of information that could be garnered from measures that are carefully designed for specific purposes.

These three summary variables were subsequently used to compare speakers' overall vernacular use in the two different contexts. A repeated measures analysis using the general linear model was performed to account for the dependency between the observations within each child. As table 4 shows, the difference between contexts was statistically significant using all three summary variables and regardless of how the measures were calculated (i.e., by words or by utterances).

Thus, speakers used significantly more AAVE features in the informal contexts than in the formal contexts. Figure 1 illustrates AAVE feature use by context for the summary measures calculated as a proportion of total utterances. Figure 2 depicts the same results for measures calculated as a propor-

TABLE 4
Test of Difference (Context) for Each Summary Measure

| Summary Measure | <i>F</i> -value | <i>p</i> -value |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| CW measure (communication units) | $F_{1,106} = 10.91$ | 0.001 |
| CW measure (words) | $F_{1,106} = 112.65$ | < 0.001 |
| Full measure (communication units) | $F_{1,106} = 12.00$ | < 0.001 |
| Full measure (words) | $F_{1,106} = 115.54$ | < 0.001 |
| Subset measure (communication units) | $F_{1,106} = 16.70$ | < 0.001 |
| Subset measure (words) | $F_{1,106} = 117.62$ | < 0.001 |

FIGURE 1
Comparison by Context Using Total Utterances in Summary Measure Calculations

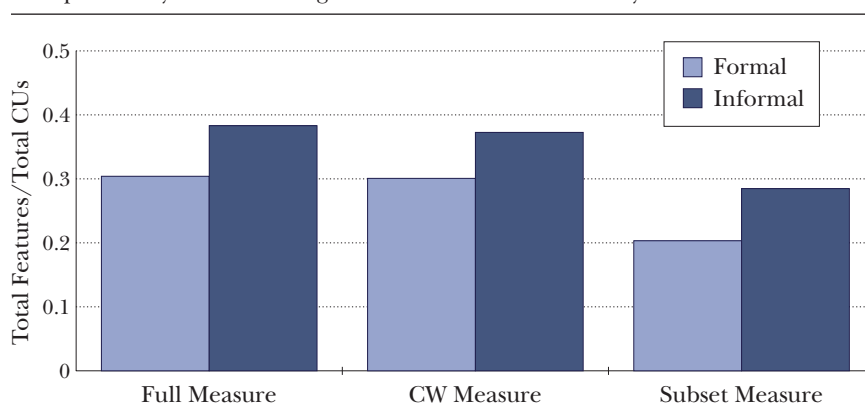


FIGURE 2
Comparison by Context Using Total Words in Summary Measure Calculations

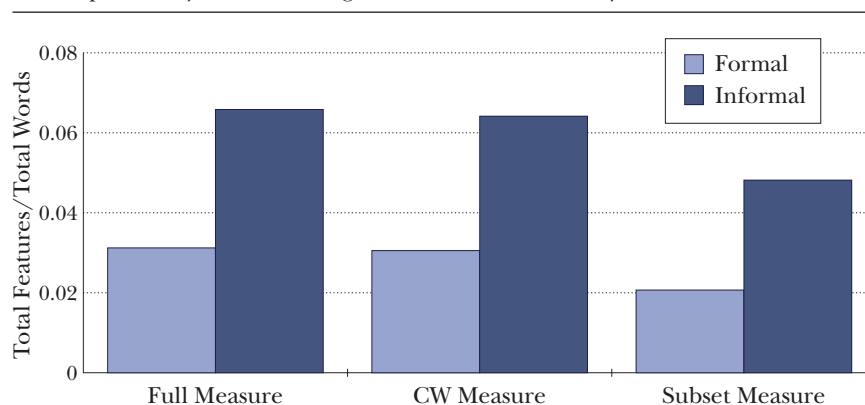
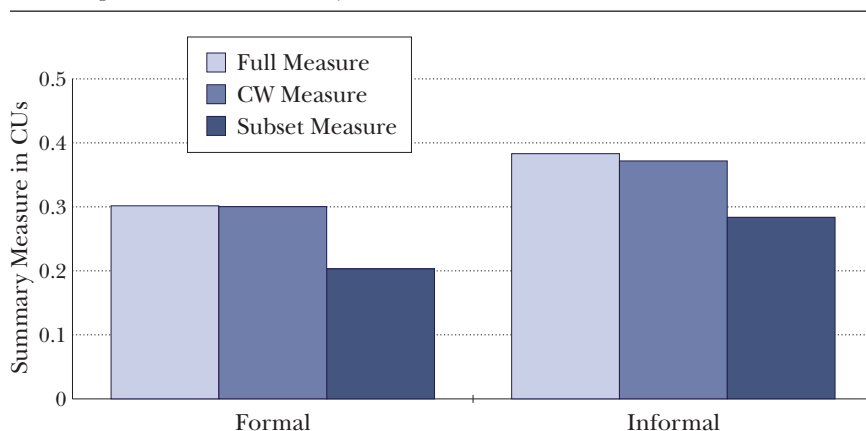


FIGURE 3
Comparison of All Summary Measures Calculated in Communication Units



tion of the total number of words. All of these comparisons demonstrated statistically significant differences, regardless of the measure used.

As the literature on AAVE and on style shift in general cites context formality as a common source of style shift, the resultant shift found in these analyses was expected. The most interesting outcome of these analyses was that all of the summary measures were very consistent and reliable. Specifically, the success of the subset measure indicated that a measure containing a small number of features can be effectively used to identify style shift in AAVE. The next step, then, was to directly compare this measure to the two larger measures. To more effectively assess the measures' success at capturing the subjects' style shifting, a third method of comparison was applied. In this method, a proportion of the formal summary score to the informal summary score was computed for each measure, allowing for a better opportunity to distinguish the difference between formal and informal linguistic behavior. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship among these measures by context. As figure 3 indicates, the values of the three summary measures were all very close in both the formal and informal cases.

CONCLUSION

Building on previous studies of style and previous uses of composite language measures like the Craig and Washington DDM, the approach to studying style shift advocated in this article allows researchers to go beyond the examination of individuals' style shifting and examine it at the group level. What is offered

here is not meant to replace more standard methods of investigation, that is, those that rely on the detailed analysis of case studies. Such studies are uniquely able to answer a range of important questions concerning both the nature of style shift and the reasons why speakers engage in it. Instead, the methods introduced here are meant to work in concert with and complement these more traditional techniques, and in doing so, to expand the possibilities for understanding the use of style and its broader implications for speakers. Tracking style shift using a subset of features culled from a larger composite dialect measure increases the number and kinds of relevant statistical techniques and thus allows researchers to capture generalizations about groups of speakers in order to better understand the use of language in society.

Our study illustrates one such opportunity by investigating style shifting among 108 African American adolescents. The subset measure used indicated a statistically significant increase in speakers' use of AAVE forms in informal situations as compared to formal contexts. Comparison of these results with those of two larger composite measures, including the Craig and Washington DDM, supports its validity. Not only did the large measures detect the same result as the subset with regard to shifting styles, but a direct comparison between the subset and the composite measures indicated an extremely large positive correlation ($r = .94$), which further supports the efficacy of a measure consisting of a small set of features. Knowing how this group of AAVE speakers performs as style shifters adds important information to their educational profiles. The tool is now being used with this same group to investigate possible correlations between style shifting and literacy, as well as to answer such questions as whether students who begin as frequent style shifters continue that behavior.

The findings reported here validate the subset measure as an effective method of identifying and quantifying style use in groups of speakers. Its utility is not restricted, however, to the study of AAVE. Appropriate subsets of features could be created and applied to other populations as well, resulting in new possibilities for the study of style. Admittedly, the attempt to capture group patterns using a composite measure takes us considerably beyond the standard approach in which independent, isolated linguistic features are correlated with social factors and style is viewed more as an individualistic rather than group phenomenon. It is, however, consistent with early variationist views, such as that of Labov (1966), that treat stylistic variation as a group phenomenon and, by giving those who hold those views new tools, we believe, constitutes a significant step in attempting to examine the authentic interplay of individual and group behavior.

NOTES

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1. Much of this early work used labels such as *Nonstandard Negro English* and later *Black English Vernacular*, a term coined by William Labov to refer to the variety we are calling *African American Vernacular English*. For further discussion and a more exhaustive list of the names that have been given to this variety, see Green (2002, 5–8).
2. To some extent, these findings are also a product of definitional issues. The Craig and Washington (2004) inventory is largely grammatical, ignoring vowels and other phonological traits in favor of morphosyntactic features, which affects the outcome of these investigations.
3. See Milroy and Gordon (2003) for a discussion of the various attempts researchers have made to define *vernacular* in the literature.
4. Utterances were determined based on the criteria set in Craig and Washington (2006) and Loban (1976), in which they were defined as “an independent clause plus its modifiers.”
5. The “mid-size central city” was Ann Arbor, Michigan, a college town where 16% of the students in the public schools are African American; the “urban-fringe community” was in Detroit, Michigan, where 86% of the student body was African American (Standard and Poor’s School Evaluation Services).
6. The added morphosyntactic features were past form for participle, regularization of irregular past tense form, zero relative pronoun, uninverted direct question, inverted question without *if/whether*, and regularized *mines*.
7. Other features that are divided in our proposed measure are the use of *ain’t* (into *ain’t* meaning *did + not* versus *are + not*, *is + not*, or *have + not*); undifferentiated pronoun case (into the use of nominative and objective pronouns used interchangeably versus the use of the objective form for the demonstrative); double marking (into multiple agreement on irregular plural nouns versus pronouns versus irregular verbs); zero possessive (into deletion of the possessive -’s marker versus the use of the nominative or objective pronominal form rather than the possessive pronoun); and double copula/auxiliary/modal (into double copula or auxiliary versus double modal).

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