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Abstract

This paper investigates the linguistic construction of ethnic and regional identities through the use of a local feature, BAT retraction and lowering (D'Onofrio 2015, Kennedy and Grama 2012, Podesva, D'Onofrio, Van Hofwegen and Kim 2015). Analysis of the speech of twelve African Americans from Bakersfield, California, shows an apparent change over time, such that younger African Americans produce backer tokens. Additionally, a targeted analysis of a single speaker suggests that African Americans' degree of retraction can index local-based stances and affiliations. Because of BAT retraction's indexing of coastal urban identity (Kennedy and Grama 2012) and the valley girl character-type (D'Onofrio 2015), the recruitment of this linguistic resource among African Americans opens up a larger discussion on who owns the local sound change.

On Negotiating Racial and Regional Identities: Vocalic Variation Among African Americans in Bakersfield, California

Sharese King*

1 Introduction

Recent studies of variation across dialects of African American English (AAE) have critiqued the tendency to homogenize AAE (Bloomquist and Gooden 2014, Thomas 2007, Wolfram 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Evidence supporting AAE diversity has emerged in speakers' variable use of morphosyntactic and phonetic features across and within regions of the United States (Wolfram 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2009). The field has progressed to recognize that AAE has diverse patterns, but has underexplored the social meaning of these patterns. African Americans' linguistic behavior is still evaluated in terms of assimilation toward regional dialect features, which are patterns found among the white majority's speech (Bloomquist and Gooden 2014). Interpreting the social meaning of AAE variation as a binary choice between accommodation or resistance to white speech flattens African Americans' multidimensional identities. Furthermore, equating the local sound change to white speech fixes the meaning of linguistic variables and would suggest that African Americans who employ local resources are performing whiteness. In this paper, I investigate the indexical potential of the local variable, BAT-backing, beyond race in African American speech. African Americans' recruitment of this local variable, which has been shown to index Californian urban identity (Kennedy and Grama 2012) and the valley-girl social-type (D'Onofrio 2014), opens up a larger discussion as to who "owns" the local sound change.

Issues of race and locality have arisen in discussions about the uniformity of AAE cross-regionally (Thomas 2007, Wolfram 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Researchers have investigated the degree of geographic variation by asking:

- A. Is there a set of norms for AAE throughout the country to which many or most African Americans are oriented (even if not all African Americans acquire the normative forms)?
- B. What degree of geographical uniformity does AAE exhibit?
- C. How dependent or independent is geographical variation in AAE from geographical variation in the white vernaculars of the same region? (Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010:3)

Studies have shown that some African American communities are retaining features of AAE, like the PIN-PEN merger, while others are not (Coggshall and Becker 2010, Eberhardt 2010, Gordon 2000, Purnell 2010, Rickford and Price 2014, Thomas 2007, Wroblewski, Strand, and Dubois 2010). Some African American communities are adopting regional dialect features, like back vowel fronting, but to varying degrees (Childs, Mallinson and Carpenter 2010, Durian, Dodsworth and Schumacher 2010, Fridland and Bartlett 2006, Purnell 2010, Thomas 2001). This variable use of AAE and local features supports the claim that AAE is not uniform (Wolfram 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Furthermore, the mixed results across the literature suggest that variation stems from different kinds of interactions with their respective regions. In order to understand African Americans' linguistic behavior, it must be contextualized across these communities.

Current approaches to studying regional variation in AAE disassociate regional and racial dialects, dichotomizing regional and racial identities. Regional variation is framed as an investigation of African Americans' participation in local sound change, but it ignores the possibility that African Americans co-create it. In this paper, I recast the relationship between regional and racial dialects by recognizing that there is more than one way to be local within a single region. Under

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this approach, African Americans are viewed as reproducing types of local identities that may or may not draw on resources from the local sound changes. Shifting the discourse to a co-territorialized discussion of AAE, rather than a de-territorialized one, avoids evaluating African Americans' use of local features as a stylistic move away from or toward a race (Eckert 2008b). I advocate changing the paradigm from examining African Americans' assimilation to white local norms to examining African Americans' recruitment of local resources in their identity constructions. This change expands the interpretation of speakers' linguistic behavior beyond their racialized identities.

Arguments for localizing ethnic identities have also been made in studies investigating Chicano speakers' use of local sound changes. Fought (1999) was one of the first sociolinguists to investigate ethnicity and local sound change in a Mexican community in Los Angeles. Middle class or non-gang members exhibited frontier /u/ tokens, suggesting that Chicano English speakers participate in the local sound change as a function of gang-status and class. Eckert (2008b) found that while Chicanos generally do not participate in the BAT nasal split, its use and non-use indexed place in a peer-based social order for both Anglos and Chicanos. As such, both Chicano and Anglo speakers had access to the pattern, regardless of their ethnicity. Both of these studies suggest that the indexicality of these variables is not limited to race.

The study of a variable's social meaning for African American speakers is emerging, but is still limited. Specifically, studies that investigate the social meaning of variables beyond race have done so through intraspeaker analyses or community studies. Scanlon and Wassink (2010) found that an African American interviewer varied her use of /ay/ reduction and the PIN-PEN merger as a function of the interlocutor's race. However, interlocutor familiarity, or the degree to which the speaker knew the interviewee, also influenced the speaker's degree of gliding and the PIN-PEN merger. Becker (2014) found that a speaker used features associated with AAE and NYC to index meanings beyond ethnicity and locality. The meanings of these variables reflected the speaker's stances on authenticity and place identity. In addition to these intraspeaker analyses, Childs (2005) revealed socially meaningful vocalic differences across two communities of practice in Texana, North Carolina. Among two women's groups, the degree to which the 'church ladies' or 'porch sitters' adopted the local patterns reflected their alignment to or from the local Texana community and urban or rural identities.

I build on these investigations by examining how twelve African Americans from Bakersfield, California use local resources to construct meaning. Disrupting the direct mapping of the local sound change to white speakers, the retraction of BAT over time in the African American community reveals that this local sound change is an available resource for both black and white speakers. Furthermore, this change over time reflects changes in neighborhoods' demographics. As African Americans come to share less predominantly black spaces, they develop linguistic practices reflective of the ideologies and beliefs local to those communities (Eckert 2008a, Jaspers 2008). Thus, BAT retraction's association with Californian coastal and urban personae can be reproduced through African Americans' participation in certain communities of practice. A closer examination of an individual speaker, Tiara, suggests that her advancement of the sound change reflects her engagement in an urban Goth-Punk scene. The results prompt a larger discussion of how African Americans construct multidimensional identities.

2 The Study

2.1 The Vowel Shifts

African Americans have been found to draw on resources from both the African American Vowel System (AAVS) and the regional dialect (Kohn 2013, Thomas 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2009), which is the California Vowel Shift (CVS) in this community. The AAVS, shown in Figure 1, involves the movement of the front vowels, the mid vowel BUT, and the low back vowel BOT. Among the front vowels, the lax vowels raise and front, while the tense vowels lower and back. The mid vowel, BUT,¹ raises and the low back vowel, BOT lowers and fronts. The more common

¹Instead of using the vowel labels from Wells 1982, I use B_T as the carrier environment after Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010.

vocalic patterns across African Americans, indicated by the solid lines, are the lowered and fronted BOT vowel, the raised and fronted mid lax vowels, as well as the raised BUT vowel. The African American Vowel Shift is viewed as a supra-regional shift among African Americans because its distribution is not restricted to a single community. For instance, Thomas (2007) found that a speaker from Brooklyn, New York and a speaker from Raleigh, North Carolina both shared the same front lax and low back vocalic patterns associated with the AAVS.

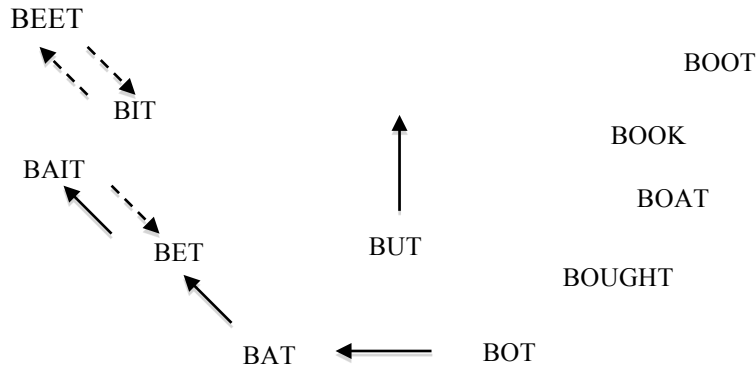


Figure 1: African American Vowel System (after Kohn 2013).

The AAVS does not share any features with the CVS. The CVS, shown in Figure 2, involves the movement of the front lax vowels and the back vowels. The raising of BOT and its merger with BOUGHT is the first step in the CVS (D'Onofrio et al. 2015, Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006, Podesva, D'Onofrio, Van Hofwegen and Kim 2015). The front lax vowels BIT, BET, and BAT lower and centralize (D'Onofrio, Eckert, Podesva, Pratt and Van Hofwegen 2014, Eckert 2008b, Kennedy and Grama 2012, Podesva et al. 2015). BAT is phonologically conditioned such that it raises in prenasal contexts and lowers and backs elsewhere (Eckert 2008b, Podesva et al. 2015). The back vowels BOOT, BOOK, and BOAT undergo fronting (Hinton, Moonwomon, Bremner, Luthin, Van Clay, Lerner and Corcoran 1987).

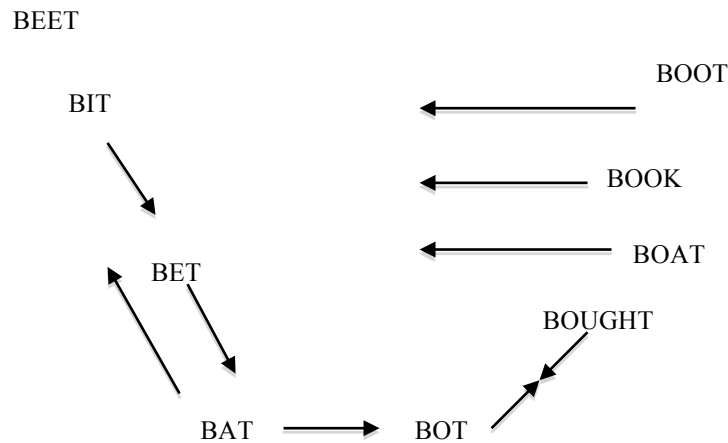


Figure 2: The California Vowel Shift (after Podesva et al. 2015).

Given the limited research on the vowel systems of African Americans in the West (Denning 1989, Rickford and Price 2013, Wassink 2015), the degree to which African American Californians produce vocalic patterns found in the California Vowel Shift (CVS) is understudied.

2.2 The Variable: BAT

In both production and perception, BAT is one of the most deeply studied variables in the CVS

and AAVS. It makes a great testing ground for observing African Americans' negotiation of their regional and racial identities as the two shifts make competing predictions. BAT raises and fronts in the AAVS and lowers and backs in the CVS. In the AAVS, BAT raising has been associated with African American identity cross-regionally (Bailey and Thomas 1998, Grimes 2005, Thomas 2007, Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010). Despite the association between BAT raising and African American identity, BAT retraction has also been found among African Americans in North Carolina (Kohn 2013). In the CVS, the retraction of BAT is led by women and speakers from more urban communities (Kennedy and Grama 2012). This feature is also associated with valley-girl and professional social types (D'Onofrio 2015).

2.3 The Community

The data used in the analysis below comes from interviews collected in Bakersfield between 2012 and 2014. Bakersfield, located in San Joaquin Valley, has an economy based in oil and agricultural production. According to the 2010 census, it is home to about 350,000 residents. Of those residents, 56 percent identify as white and 8 percent identify as black. This percentage is less than the national black average of about 13 percent.

African Americans arrived as early as 1884 in Kern County to replace Chinese labor in cotton fields (Essinger 2011). The rise in African Americans' presence in Kern County stems, in part, from The Great Migration of African Americans out of the south. However, most African Americans migrated during the Dustbowl Migration (Eissinger 2009). Though the Dustbowl Migration is more commonly associated with the movement of white families west during the Great Depression, it also brought more African Americans westward from midwestern states like Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. Both white and black migrants met resistance upon their arrival into the valley, but white migrants were able to assimilate into the mainstream culture within the next two decades (Essinger 2011). African Americans were segregated from white society in poor neighborhoods in Bakersfield's Cottonwood/Mayfield/Sunset districts (Essinger 2011, Haynes 2009). Having been involved in race riots as late as the 1960s and experiencing racism in the form of sundown curfews and employment and housing discrimination, African Americans were forced to develop their own communities. Essinger (2008) states that "[s]ystematic and institutional racism has influenced where African Americans have elected, or been allowed to live in San Joaquin Valley" (2008:65).

The predominantly African American communities that developed in the fifties and sixties came to be concentrated in East Bakersfield. In ethnographic interviews with native Bakersfieldians, several interviewees discuss a specific neighborhood in East Bakersfield called Lakeview. This neighborhood was described as a hub for black life and culture with many black-owned businesses and homes. Now, Lakeview is regarded as a dangerous and poor neighborhood. The success of the town has declined with African Americans moving out of the area to white suburbs for better economic opportunities or in response to unsafe conditions.

Older speakers who grew up in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of African Americans now live in more integrated communities where they were once disallowed. Wendy, 68, recounts, "African Americans or Blacks were not allowed in certain places. And I do remember that uh because where I live now, African Americans could not live there." Adding to the sentiments of exclusion, Victor, 65, says, "I think we had few whites, but majority black. Prejudice is still here. I don't think it will ever go away." In general, older African Americans recall living in segregated neighborhoods as a result of prejudice, and housing and employment discrimination. Wendy's ability to live in a once forbidden neighborhood, suggests some shift in race relations and opportunities made available to African Americans.

Younger speakers have grown up in more integrated spaces where African Americans are no longer the majority. For example, Jennifer, 25, says, "The black community is like – There's not much of that going on...I like never really had many African American friends." Her comments suggest that she does not have a dense African American network. Furthermore, other young speakers characterize their high schools as lacking racial diversity. Chantel, 23, states, "There's normally – there's always two and that's it. There's always two black ones, there's never more, never less, just you two." Their experiences in predominantly white neighborhoods suggest greater access to linguistic resources in the CVS.

3 Methods

The data was collected through Voices of California (VOC), a dialectology project aimed at documenting the diversity of English across the state of California. Particularly, our efforts have focused more on inland California, traveling to Redding, Merced, Bakersfield and Sacramento. Graduate students and professors conduct sociolinguistic interviews with participants, followed by a word list recording and perceptual dialectology map task (Preston 1989). One caveat of this study is that African American subjects are not always matched with African American interviewers.

The sample includes twelve African American speakers (6 females, 6 males). Speakers' ages fall between 24 and 73 years old. An attempt was made to control for education level by only including participants who had exposure to college instruction. Minimally, all speakers had "some college," meaning the participants were enrolled in college at one point in time, but did not complete school.

This study focuses on the African American speakers from Bakersfield, but I also compare their linguistic patterns to the sample of white Bakersfieldians in D'Onofrio et al., to appear. This sample of white speakers comprises 18 native Bakersfieldians (9 females, 9 males). All speakers' ages fall between 18 and 80. Their education ranges from high school graduate to graduate education.

3.1 Analysis

The interviews were transcribed in Transcriber or Elan, and then force-aligned into word and sound segments using the FAVE software package. Praat scripts were created to extract words containing the vowels of interest and to adjust the consonant and vowel boundaries. BIT, BET, BAT and BOT tokens were extracted to investigate the front lax vowels of the AAE and California English vowel shift. BEET, BAT, BOT, and POOL were anchor vowels used in the normalization of each speaker's vowel space.

For each vowel class specified above, a target was set of 25 tokens per vowel. Up to two tokens per lemma were accepted for every vowel class, except POOL. This vowel class occurs less often, thus three tokens per lemma were accepted. Several other exclusions were made for the sake of reliably marking the boundary between the vowels of interest and neighboring sounds. Except in the case of POOL, tokens preceding a vowel, glide, or liquid were excluded, as were tokens following a vowel, glide or /r/. Any vowels under 60 milliseconds in duration were not considered. In total, 1,335 tokens were collected across speakers. A Praat script collected the F1 and F2 measurements at vowel midpoint.

The vowels were normalized in two steps. The Hertz midpoint values were converted to Bark using Traunmüller's (1997) formula, and the Bark values were normalized through NORM. Using the Watt and Fabricius modified method (Fabricius, Watt and Johnson 2009), vowel formants were normalized based on the corners of the vowel envelope: the high front corner, the high back corner, and the low front corner.

This study examined the height and backness of BAT. To assess the height and backness, the normalized F1 and F2 means were compared across both African American and white speakers and among African American speakers. The F1 and F2 values were included as response variables in their own linear mixed models. These models were created in R using the lmer function (Baktes, Maechler, Bolker and Walker 2014) and *p* values were obtained using the lmerTest package. For each model, the fixed effects were duration, sex, and age, while the random effects included speaker, word, preceding consonant, following consonant, and interviewer.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Community Results

Since BAT raises and fronts in the AAVS and lowers and backs in the CVS, two separate measures are used to account for its movement in either dimension. African Americans' F1 and F2 values were compared against white speakers' F1 and F2 values. No significant main effects for

age (Coeff: $6.221e-04$, $t=1.394$), gender (Coeff: $1.040e-02$, $t=-0.636$), or race (Coeff: $1.158e-02$, $t=0.645$) emerged for the normalized F1 values. Additionally, there were no interactions between age, race and gender for the normalized F1 values. A main effect of age (Coeff: $5.259e-02$, $t=3.266$, $p < 0.01$), race (Coeff: $1.582e-03$, $t=3.730$, $p=0.001$) and gender (Coeff: $-1.500e-01$, $t=-7.169$, $p < 0.001$) surfaced for the F2 values. Older speakers have greater F2 values than younger speakers, men have greater F2 values than women, and African Americans have greater F2 values than white speakers. Similar to results found in inland Californian communities (Podesva et al. 2015), there is a change over time for all speakers and women are leading it. White speakers also retract BAT more than African American speakers. No interactions were found to be significant.

The following analyses will focus on variation among African American speakers. Figure 3 illustrates the range of variation across the speakers in their F1 and F2 values. The normalized F1 values do not appear to be socially constrained by age or gender for this group of speakers. There is, however, a change over time in the F2 values such that younger speakers are retracting BAT more than older speakers. No significant differences in gender emerge, though older men appear to have frontier tokens than older women.

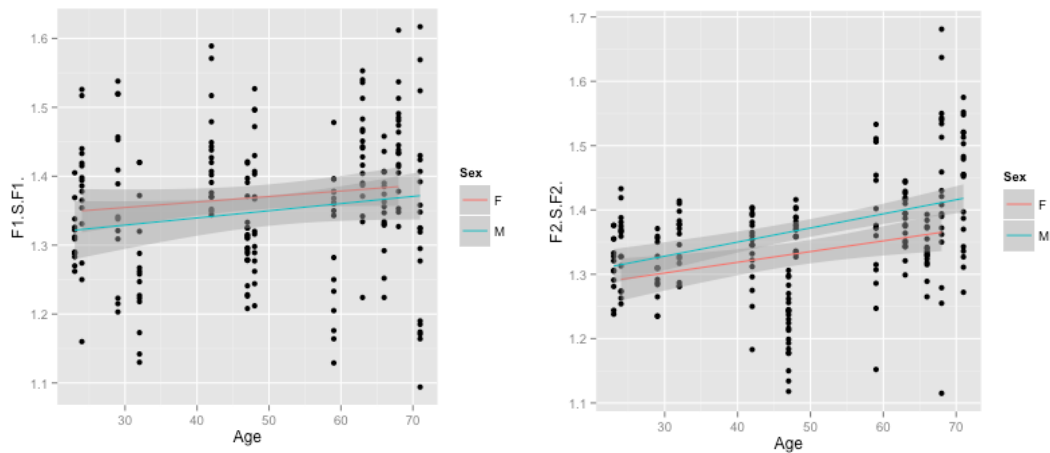


Figure 3: Normalized F1 (left) and F2 (right) values across African American speakers.

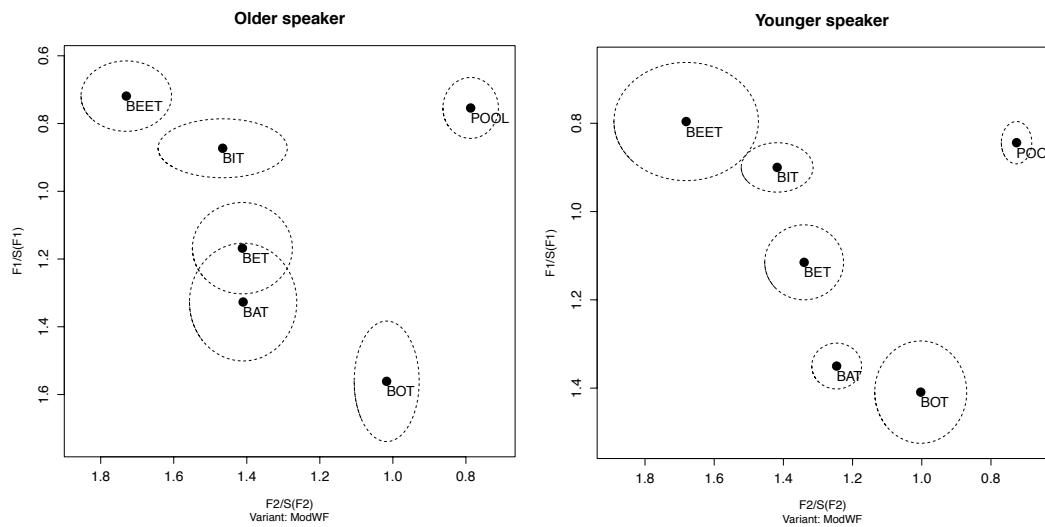


Figure 4: Vowel plots for two African American speakers exhibiting different degrees of backing and lowering (left, 63-year-old male; right, 23-year old male).

The differences in BAT retraction across age can be seen in the vowel spaces of two speakers

in Figure 4. In the vowel plot of the older speaker, the distance between BAT and LOT in the F2 dimension is greater in comparison to the distance between the two vowels in the younger speaker's plot. BAT also has a higher F1 value in the younger speaker's speech, suggesting that some younger speakers may be lowering BAT over time.

As these data show, younger speakers are producing backer tokens than older speakers. The generational differences are expected in light of the different experiences in which older and younger speakers report living. With younger speakers growing up in more diverse neighborhoods, we can anticipate that they have had more access to CVS patterns. These results fit into a larger discussion of how the degree of segregation in a community affects the uptake of this particular regional dialect feature. Yaeger-Dror and Thomas (2010) have proposed that speakers in more segregated spaces are less likely to adopt regional sound changes. Research has also shown that African American speakers use more AAVS features when they attend schools with high populations of African Americans (Deser 1990) or have strong ties with black networks (Fridland 2003).

4.2 Localizing African American Identity

Although there may be larger correlations among macrosocial categories, microsocial relations are also important to the linguistic behavior of African Americans. Studying the shared practices African Americans engage in across communities informs our understanding of why they are or are not recruiting local variables into their stylistic constructions. Understanding African Americans' participation in these social practices also speaks to how different subcultures influence the propagation of sound changes across regions. I will focus on the speaker with the most retracted BAT tokens in the African American sample, to argue that participation in more diverse networks does not simply provide exposure to regional sound changes, but leads to shared meanings and practices that call for the use of these changes.

Like the younger speakers, Tiara, 47, grew up in neighborhoods with smaller concentrations of African Americans. She self-identifies strongly as African American, and as a member of an alternative music scene, which is subsumed under the Goth-Punk culture. Her participation in this community is evident in this excerpt:

- IV:** So – so um, 'cause I've heard this from a few people that, um, that there was a little bit of, I guess, cross pollination between like the alternative communities and like the (()) communities
- Tiara:** Oh, absolutely. Because I mean, there wasn't any place for us to go. So we all just – wherever there was a place where we could go, the people that were the misfits, we all just all went to them; To – to that place. So we all – everybody knew each other. So you didn't have like in the bigger cities to where everybody had their own cliques and scenes. Everybody just hung out. So it was the Goths, it was the Punks, it was everybody just hung out together.

There is a small, but consistent following in Bakersfield. Though this 'alternative' culture exists in Bakersfield, it is more of an urban scene with stronger roots in larger cities like Los Angeles (LA). Tiara lives in Bakersfield, but travels to LA to attend events related to this community of practice. She establishes her relationship with LA in the following excerpt:

- IV:** How – so how was LA – like how was the experience of living in LA?
- Tiara:** It was different 'cause I – we had uncles that lived there, and they were like, 'You're not gonna survive here 'cause you're a country girl coming from Bakersfield.'
- IV:** Is that the impression that – that
- Tiara:** Well you know 'cause my – I mean, even though we hung out on the scene, we pretty much led a really sheltered life. Like, I mean, we had curfews, we couldn't – I mean, even though we were able to sneak out and do some things, we weren't able to always get out. You know, 'cause, you know, we had strict parents, we couldn't always get out and do things. So wh- – I mean it's not like we were exposed to a lot. I mean, it looked like we were, because of the

way we looked, but not really. Completely innocent. You know what I mean? But livin' in the city kind of changed that, and I'm glad for the experience, and I really started to like it, 'cause I lived in Hollywood, off Sunset and Gower, and I just loved it. But I got tired of like, just, um, I didn't have a car. I just got tired of like, just the fastness of LA, it's like well, I'll go home and get a job and buy a car, just come and visit and go home.

IV: So you still go out in the –

Tiara: Oh yeah, all the time. Yeah. I travel a lot.

Ideologically, Tiara ties a country girl persona to Bakersfield. Living in LA moved her away from the sheltered and innocent lifestyle she had at home. Despite her return to Bakersfield, she travels back frequently for work and Goth events. Given the fact that being a member of the Goth-Punk community is still a large part of her identity, Tiara's degree of retraction may reflect her orientation to a more urban lifestyle.

By juxtaposing the country girl and the Goth-Punk personae, Tiara can be read as reproducing an urban versus country opposition. Given the indexical link between urban orientation and advanced BAT retraction (Kennedy and Grama 2012), Tiara may be reproducing an urban identity via participation in the Goth-Punk community. This dichotomy has been observed in other inland communities where the local town and country divide mirror larger contrasts like the urban and non-urban opposition (Podesva et al. 2015). Geenberg's (2014) study of Trinity County also showed that young urban-oriented women led in BAT retraction.

5 Conclusion

African American Bakersfieldians show generational differences in their use of the BAT vowel. This change in progress points to a change in community demographics. However, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding the use of this variable through a speaker's social network, as well as the individual's social interactions with their peers. The role of identity work is important to explaining how and why sound changes are advanced. Instead of asking whether or not African Americans participate in the regional sound change, this study is a step toward understanding how a speaker's participation in locally meaningful social practices gives rise to the larger patterns observed across the community. Because participation in these social practices need not be restricted to white speakers, the linguistic resources available across these groups can span racial categories. Race and ethnicity may influence what variables speakers lay claim to, but it does not determine it. Rather, the recruitment of local variables is contingent on how speakers engage in shared practices (Becker 2014, Childs 2005, Eckert 2008b, Fought 1999).

Careful consideration of Tiara's social practices suggests strongly that her advancement in the vowel shift, particularly BAT-backing, reflects an urban orientation via the Goth-Punk subculture. On the surface, Tiara's linguistic behavior could be interpreted as greater assimilation to the local white majority. However, as we have progressed to view a white speaker's use of AAE features as alignment with qualities ideologically linked to black masculinity (Bucholz 1999), Tiara's use of a local feature can be viewed as alignment with qualities ideologically linked to Californian urban identity. Her recruitment of BAT retraction in her identity construction supports the need to view African Americans as stylistic agents capable of constructing multidimensional identities. More nuanced analyses of linguistic variation and racial identity will prioritize the investigation of additional dimensions beyond race. Specifically, we must explore where African Americans situate their identities in a wider landscape of local styles.

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