

## Neighborhoods influence use of African American Vernacular, research shows

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In a new study, linguistics Professor John Rickford and colleagues examined how the neighborhoods where people live affect their use of African American Vernacular English. Credit: L.A. Cicero

What neighborhood children grow up in can influence their use of

African American Vernacular English and eventual prospects for educational success and socio-economic mobility, a new Stanford study shows.

In the first experiment of its kind on the subject, Stanford linguistics Professor John Rickford and his colleagues (several of them economists) sought to better understand what shapes the relative use of African American Vernacular English vs. Standard American English in inner city neighborhoods. In particular, they explored whether moving into a more economically advantaged neighborhood causes a decline in the rate at which speakers use the African American vernacular.

African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, is a dialect of American English most commonly spoken today by urban working-class African Americans.

Rickford said it resembles other vernacular or nonstandard varieties – like Cockney or Appalachian English – in the sense that while it's important for self-expression, and for marking group identity and solidarity, it can also trigger discrimination in the workplace, housing market, schools and courts.

"Language is in many respects a socially constructed behavior, jointly influenced by exposure, identity and peer group influence. One's speech patterns are shaped not only by one's family, but also by one's broader regional and social environment," wrote Rickford, a leading expert on socio-linguistics and the J.E. Wallace Sterling Professor in the Humanities at Stanford.

## **Vernacular of the street**

The researchers examined how the neighborhoods where people live affect their use of African American Vernacular English by studying the

[speech patterns](#) of participants in the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing experimental program, a federal government project aimed at helping very-low-income families move from poverty-stricken urban areas to low-poverty neighborhoods with the help of vouchers.

Participants in five U.S. cities (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York) were randomly assigned between 1994 and 1998 either to an experimental group that received vouchers to move to low-poverty neighborhoods or to a [control group](#) that did not.

For their research, Rickford and his colleagues analyzed audio recordings of 629 non-Hispanic African American youth, made 10 to 15 years after initial enrollment in the experiment, studying them for occurrences of language features that often distinguish African American Vernacular English from Standard American English.

Examples of AAVE features studied include: copula absence, or the absence of is or are in sentences like He happy ("He is happy"), They going home ("They are going home"); double negation, or the marking of negation on the auxiliary verb and indefinite pronoun, as in She ain't tellin' nobody ("She isn't telling anybody"); and the deletion of the final consonant in words ending in two or more consonants, as in fas' ("fast") and han' ("hand").

The researchers found that, on average, people from the control group – who were not given vouchers to move to low-poverty housing – used African American Vernacular English about 48.5 percent of the time.

This number was about 3 percentage points lower for people from the experimental housing voucher group, a modest but statistically significant drop, demonstrating the impact of socio-economic environment on linguistic versatility, Rickford said.

## **Dialects and discrimination**

He noted that although both the experimental and control group families started out in equally distressed neighborhoods, those who were given the opportunity to move to lower poverty neighborhoods were better able to shift from African American Vernacular English to Standard American English as needed.

This improvement in their bidialectal competence – the ability to speak two different dialects – potentially makes them less subject to dialect discrimination on both educational and economic fronts, he added.

Rickford and his colleagues also found that young people in families that enrolled in the Moving to Opportunity program because they cared the most about crime or school quality in their public housing projects experienced the largest reductions in their use of African American Vernacular English.

One explanation may be that youth in families most concerned about the potentially adverse effects of the "code," or vernacular of the street, had fewer social ties with peer groups using AAVE and less pressure to use it after moving to less poor areas, he said.

The fact that the low-poverty neighborhoods also included significantly higher numbers of adults who had completed high school or college, and had more highly ranked schools, may also have contributed to the increased ability to use Standard American English demonstrated by youth in the experimental group. (These and other factors are explored in the appendix to the journal article, Rickford noted.)

## **The road ahead**

In today's American society, the use of African American Vernacular English – despite its usefulness – is too often associated with poor schooling, housing and jobs, the researchers wrote.

"While we should continue to fight against the dialect prejudice that causes this, we also need to help students increase their ability to shift to Standard English as needed," Rickford said.

In fact, rising U.S. residential economic segregation may be contributing to growing differences in African American Vernacular English usage, according to the researchers. Such a trend may lead to even greater discrimination in schools and workplaces and exacerbate the disadvantages of youth growing up in high-poverty areas, he said.

The authors suggest the adoption of public policies that reduce neighborhood economic and racial segregation.

"Changes in neighborhood economic and racial segregation may change school or economic outcomes by changing AAVE speakers' inclination and ability to code switch to SAE," they wrote.

This could enhance the bidialectal competence of AAVE-speaking youth and improve their prospects for success in schools, workplaces and other places where dialect discrimination is common, researchers said.

Provided by Stanford University

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