Issues with Contemporary AAE

TOWARD A DESCRIPTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH DIALECT REGIONS USING "BLACK TWITTER"

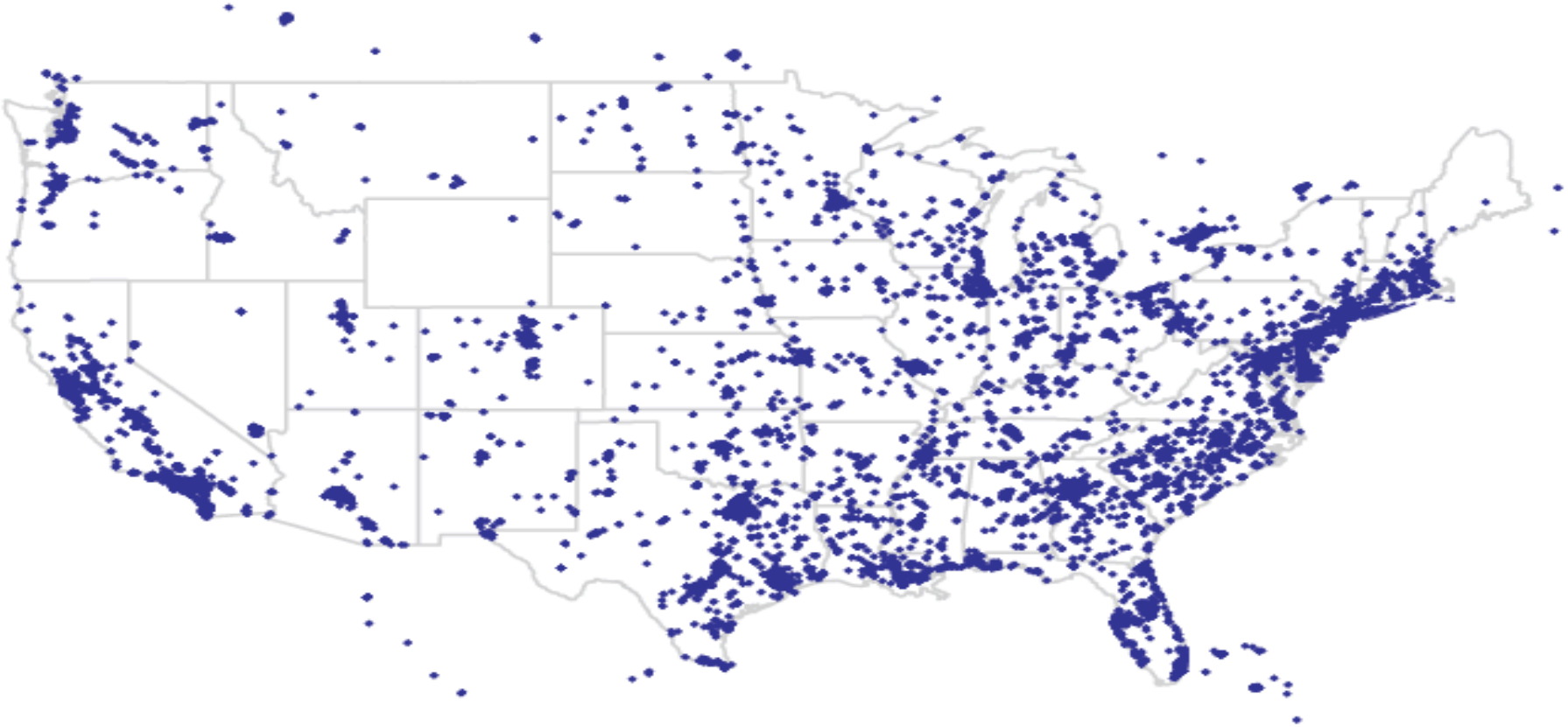
TAYLOR JONES
University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT: Recent research has established that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is not monolithic. However, variation in AAVE has not been systematically described and mapped. This article uses new computational methods and social media to describe AAVE variation and to show AAVE dialect regions distinct from—and perpendicular to—the regions of other dialects of North American English. This study maps the geographic patterns of 30+ common nonstandard spellings on Twitter (e.g., *sholl* 'sure'). It shows that nonstandard AAVE orthography delineates distinct dialect regions with shared phonological and lexical features. These regions are not coterminous with traditional North American dialect regions; rather, they align with patterns of movement during the Great Migrations.

KEYWORDS: AAVE, dialect geography, social media, nonstandard orthography

FIGURE 1

Locations of the Geotagged Tweets in the Corpus Gathered as of January 2015 (17,273 Tweets)



is amenable to traditional techniques of dialect geography. The mapping of data from Twitter reveals startling and unexpected patterns and reinforces previous sociocultural analysis and folk theory. My research has two main geographic findings:

1. There are distinct dialect regions in AAVE, which do not correspond to the dialect regions for white English in Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006) (figure 4) and other Dialect Atlases. Moreover, the dialect regions align exceptionally well with patterns of movement from the (Second) Great Migration (figure 5), and support a narrative of population movement followed by linguistic innovation.
2. There is strong influence from cities, with Atlanta and the Interstate-95 corridor forming competing loci for "Black Twitter," and cities exhibiting distinct local flavor.

FIGURE 4
Dialect Regions According to Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006, 121)

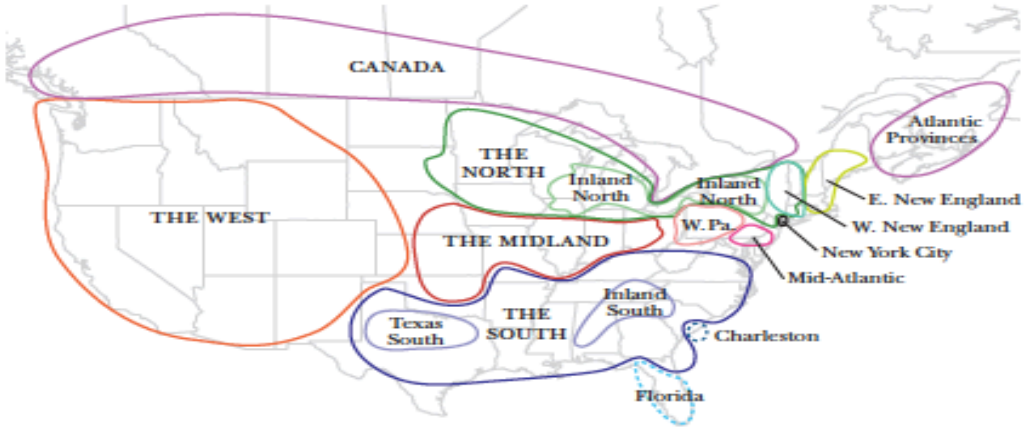
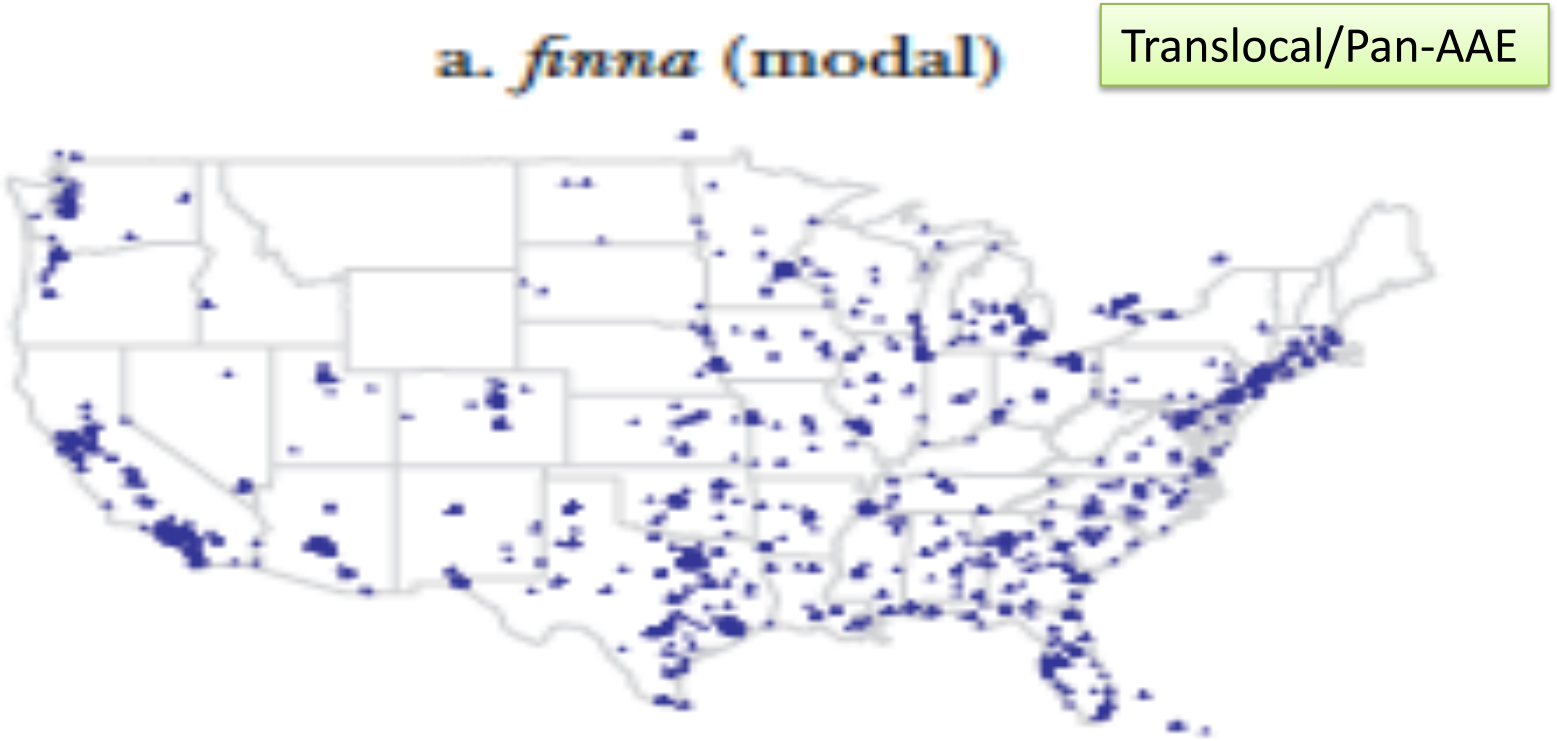


FIGURE 5
The Second Great Migration
(after M. Siegel 2005, based on Smallwood and Elliot 1998)

Distributed across US



Translocal/Pan-AAE

Localized in multiple areas

Locations of Tweets Containing Stressed *been*

The Southern Region

Regional/Southern-AAE

FIGURE 10
Locations of Tweets Containing *yeen* 'you ain't'

Localized to northeast

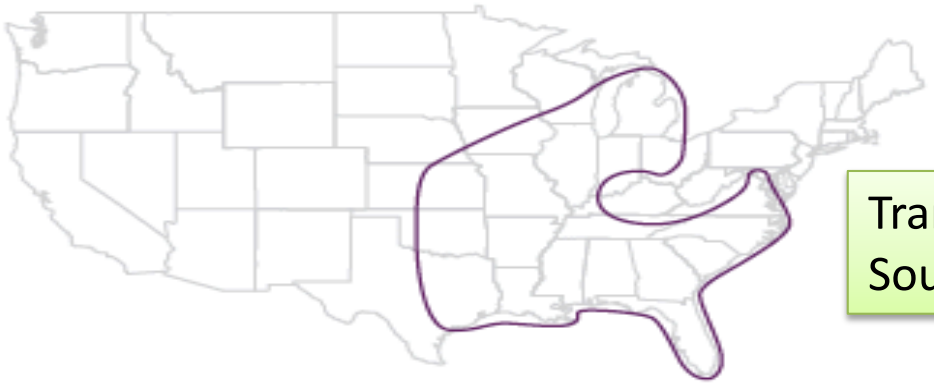
Regional/Northeast-AAE

FIGURE 12
Locations of Tweets Containing *suttin* and *iont*

a. *suttin* 'something'

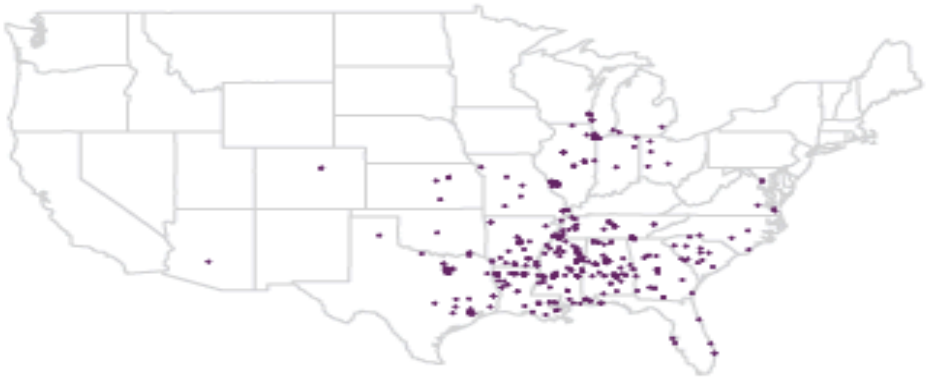
b. *iont* 'I ain't'

FIGURE 13
The Great Migration Region



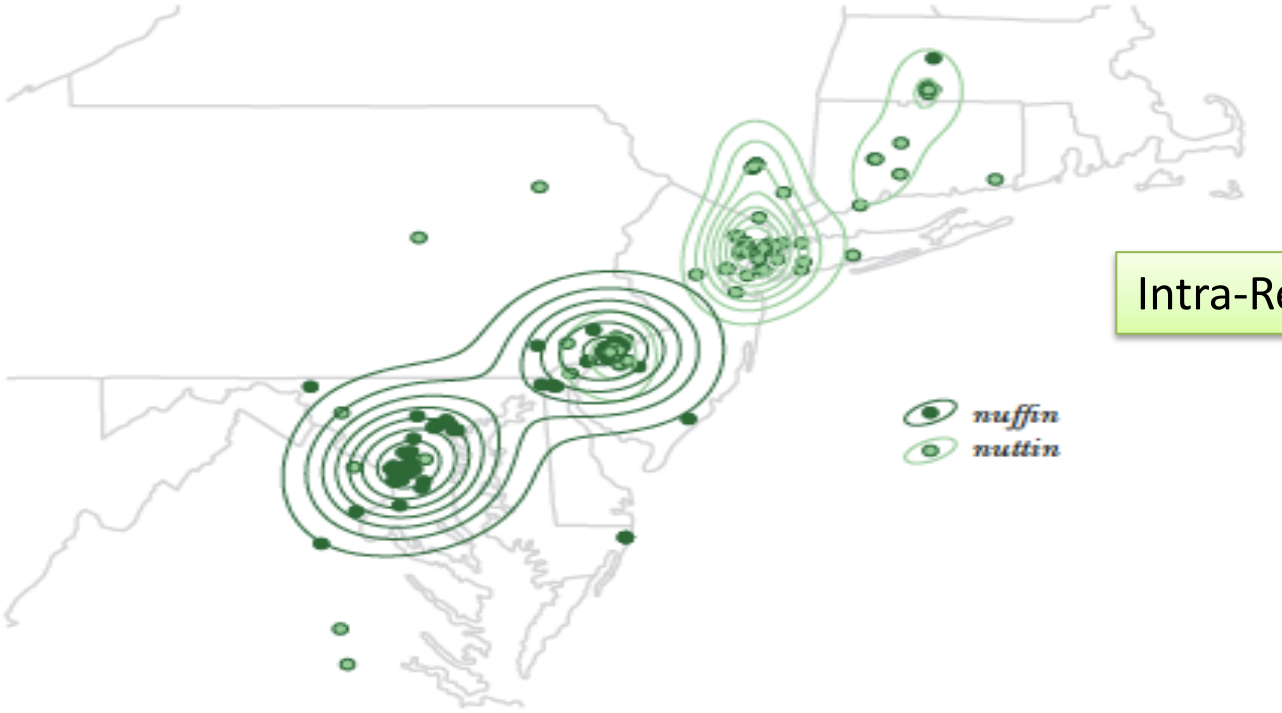
Translocal?/Midwest and South

FIGURE 14
Locations of Tweets Containing *sholl* 'sure'



Northeast localization

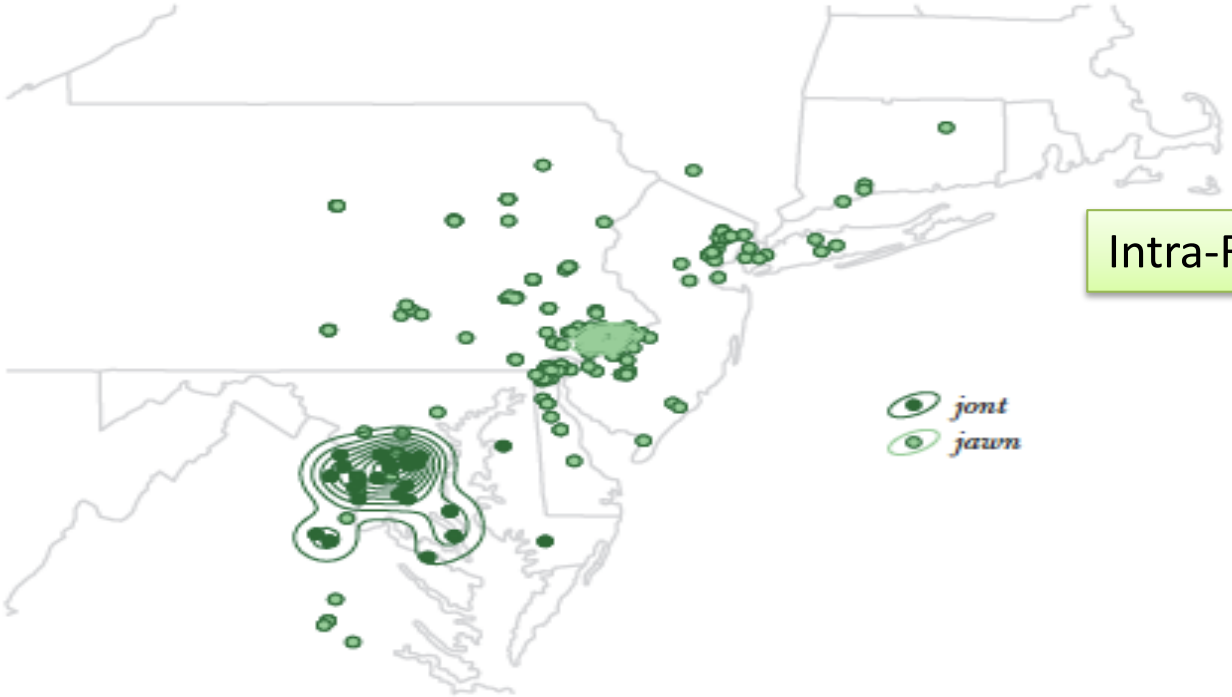
FIGURE 16
Locations of Tweets Containing *nuffin* and *nuttin* 'nothing' on the East Coast



Intra-Regional/local-AAE

More localization

FIGURE 17
Locations of Tweets Containing *jont* and *jawn* in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia



Intra-Regional/local-AAE

"MY PRESIDEN(T) AND FIRS(T) LADY WERE BLACK": STYLE, CONTEXT, AND CORONAL STOP DELETION IN THE SPEECH OF BARACK AND MICHELLE OBAMA

NICOLE HOLLIDAY
Pomona College

ABSTRACT: This article compares Michelle and Barack Obama's coronal stop deletion (CSD) rates in different contexts at different time points in order to examine the effects of time and context on an aspect of the speech of these black political figures. Data are taken from each of the Obamas' speeches from the 2012 and 2016 Democratic National Conventions as well as two joint interviews from 2012 and 2016. Results of regression models indicate that Barack and Michelle Obama's CSD is systematically subject to contextual, phonological, and morphological constraints. Results indicate differences between phonological and morphological conditioning effects observed for each speaker, evidence that Barack and Michelle employ this variable differently, perhaps due to different dialect backgrounds and social expectations, with Michelle patterning more like African American English speakers in earlier studies than Barack. Results show how CSD may be a useful variable for understanding patterns of style in the linguistic behavior of individuals.

KEYWORDS: sociolinguistics, African American English, phonological variation, political speech

FIGURE 1

Barack and Michelle's Deletion Rates by Following Phoneme Type, Formality, and Year

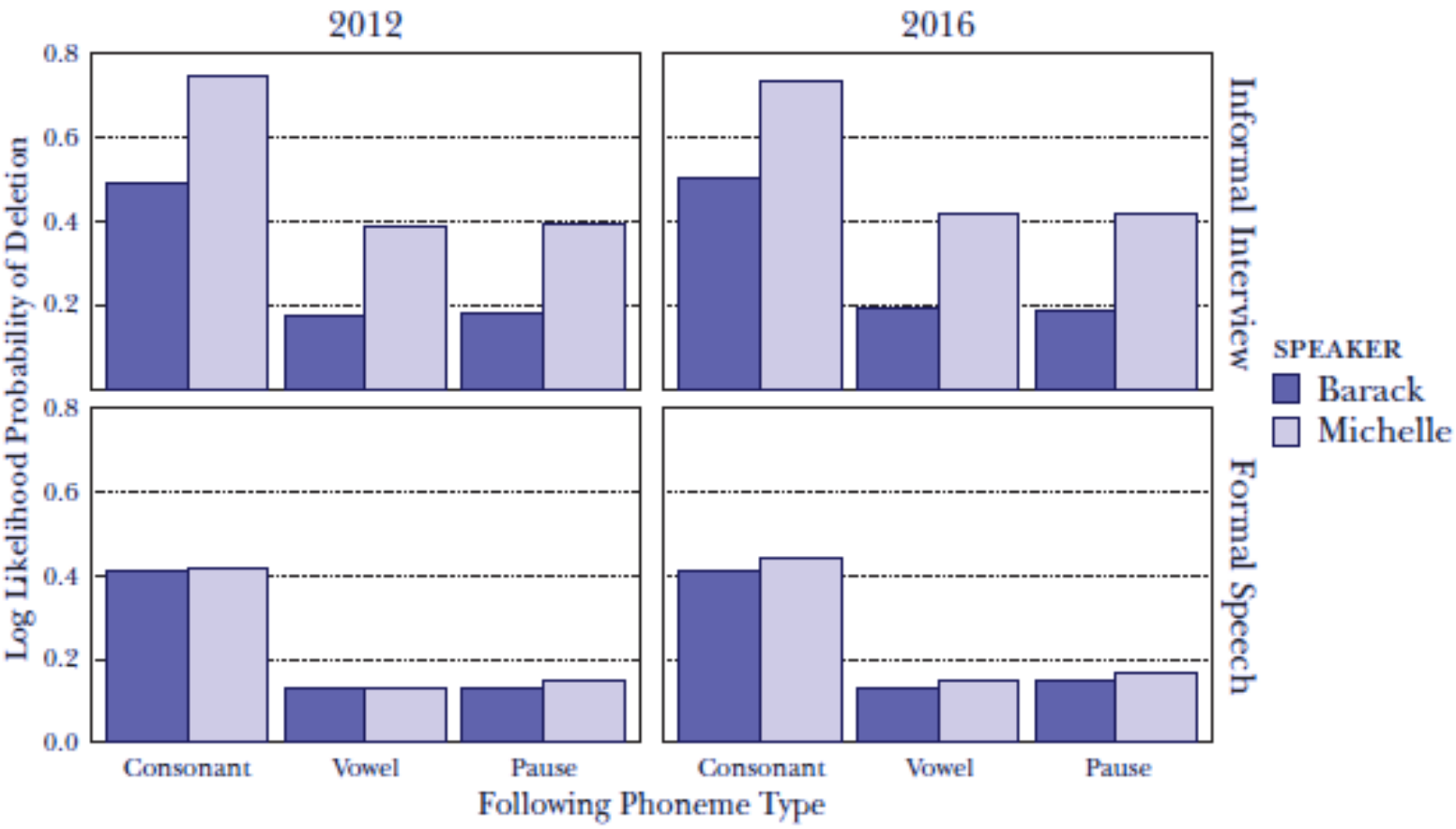


FIGURE 2

Barack and Michelle's Deletion Rates by Morphological Category

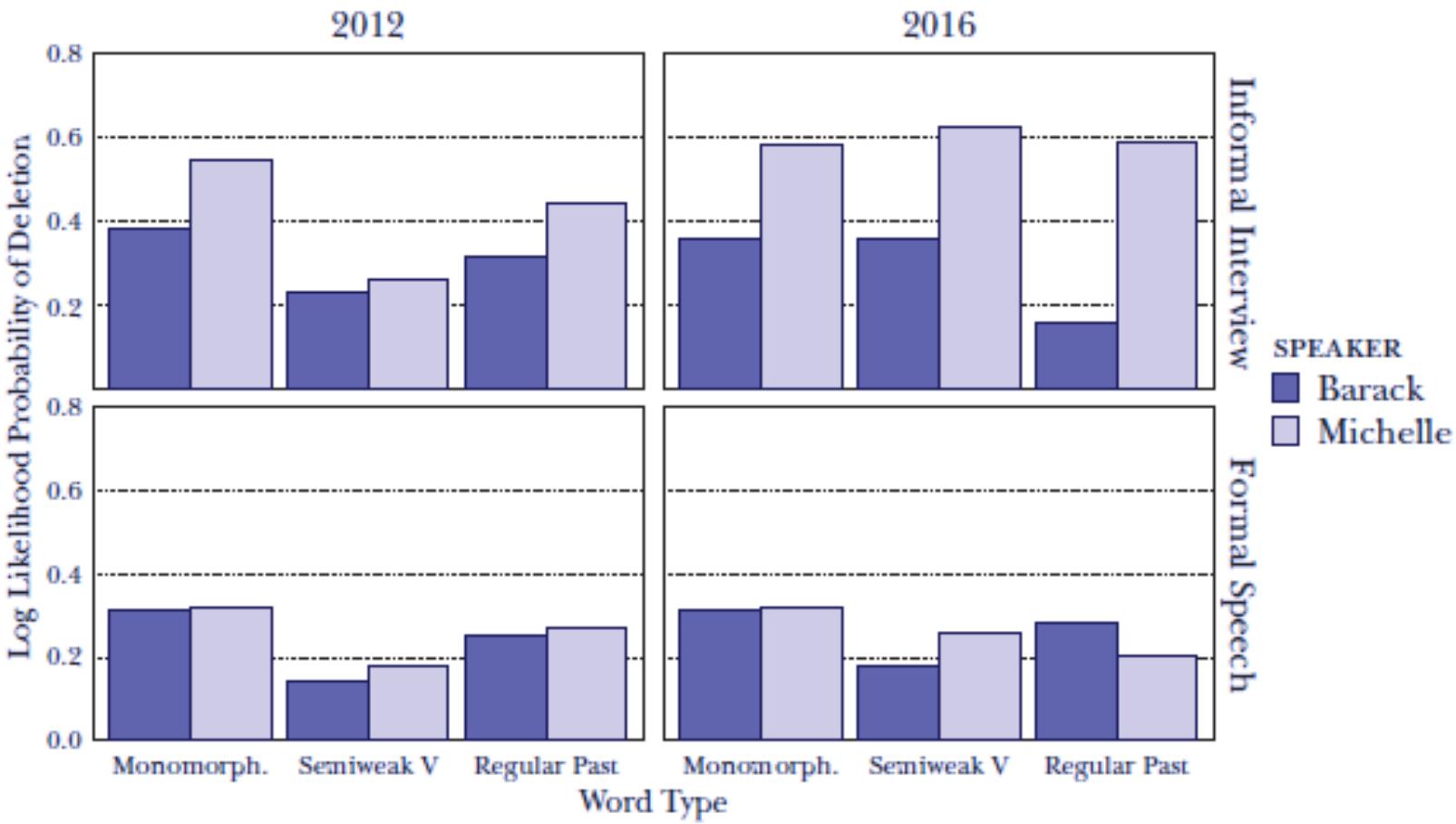


FIGURE 3

Barack Obama Predicted Retention Rates by Guy's (1991a) Exponential Model versus Actual Retention Rates

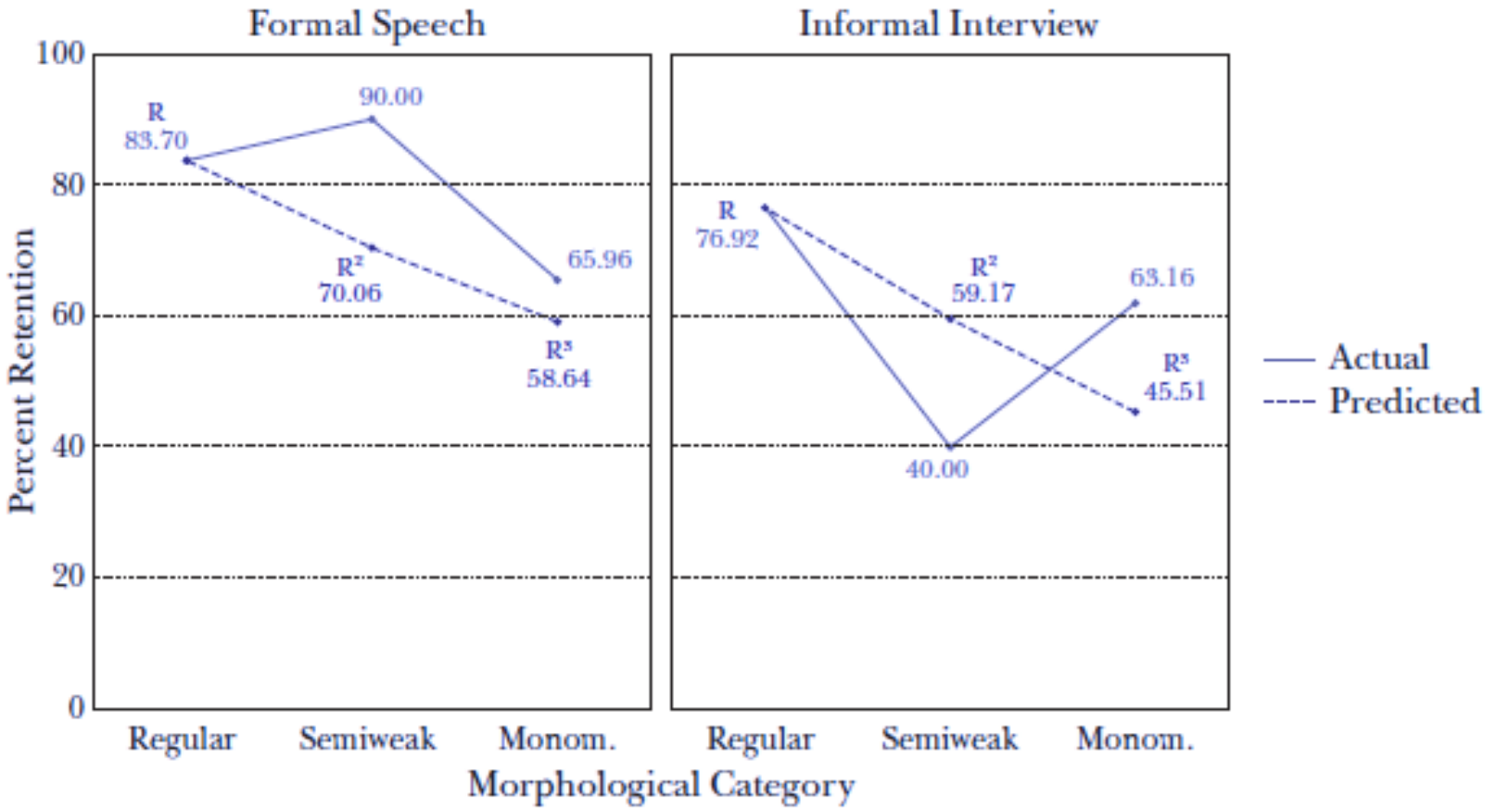
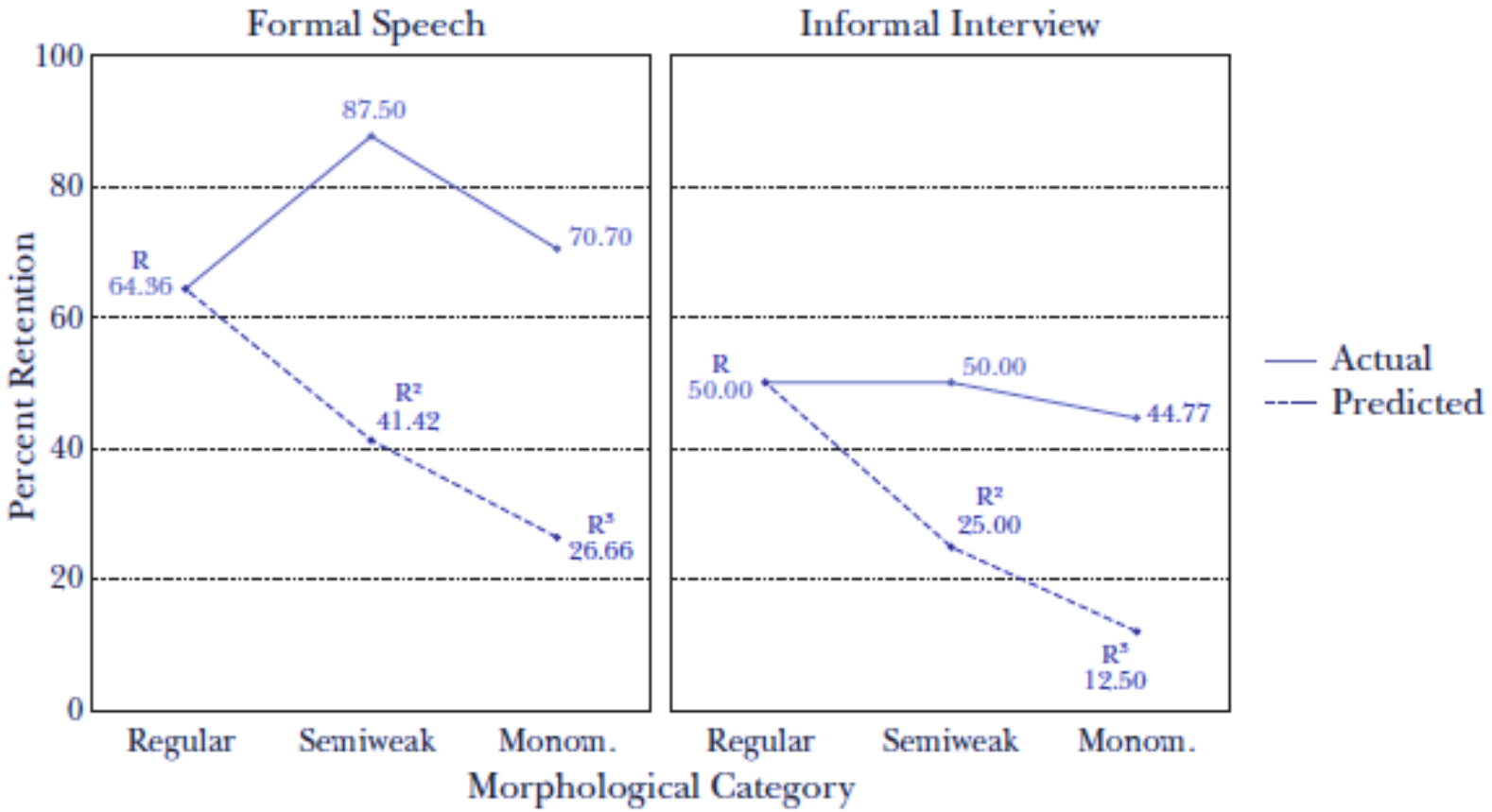


FIGURE 4

Michelle Obama Predicted Retention Rates by Guy's (1991a) Exponential Model versus Actual Retention Rates



Are there Pan AAE features?

- Claim about homogeneity of dialect is homogeneity of speech community
- Findings by authors in Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2010 (citing Dorrill 1986)
  - Kurath's data show BITE & BOUT vowels similar with surrounding whites
  - But, monophthongized BOAT, BAIT and BOUGHT unified AAE communities
- Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States
  - Less fronting of BOUT for AAE speakers
- Other modern features (rates of adoption of local features often lags for blacks than whites)

Convergence

- One ‘narrative’
  - “All slaves had a uniform experience.”
- High black-white contact in plantation society
  - Mufwene: most slaves in environments with 4 slaves
  - Increases the probability of variable experiences with higher contact between slaves and owners

Divergence

- Post civil war experiences
  - Reconstruction of south
  - Migration away from south
- Overt and covert segregation
  - Housing, employment, education
  - Milwaukee Northside ‘core’ < housing compacts
- Linguisitically
  - Non participation in urban vowel shifts
  - Resultative ‘be done’, -s marking past time, habitual ‘be’
  - Increased frequency of –s absence

Convergence

- African Americans and social class
  - More segregation focus now against [black + WC]
- Contact produces negotiated change
  - Wolfram: "African American communities, particularly in the rural South, may show alternative trajectories of change with respect to core AAE structures and regional accommodation, *ranging from the intensification of core AAE features concurrent with the recession of regionalized features to the dissipation of AAE features and the maintenance of regionalized features*."

Summary of AAE Variation

- Convergence vs. divergence
  - Share croppers similar to whites around them; inner-city northerners less like whites (not around them)
  - Pan-AAE features have been strong
  - But locally they start being renegotiated based on contact and perceptions in the local community.
- Geographic variation
  - Locality
  - Pan-AAE (supraregional norm) is r-less; northern varieties often are r-ful
  - Pan-AAE is not followed in its entirety; e.g., p. 59 vowels used in Hyde County, NC
  - Other example from Appalachia (p. 61)
  - Summary: speakers mix features to signal regional and ethnic identities
- Class variation
  - MC AAE speakers focus more on syntax than accent
  - Signal by speech pragmatics and stylistics

Contact

- Contact may lead to
  - More similarities (shared community goals)
  - Less similarities (forced integration)
- Contact reflected in different parts of language
  - Rickford 1999: compare two residents of Sea Islands, one white, one black
  - Both men shared accent (pronunciation) of Sea Islands
  - Divergence in syntax and morphology

- Contact
  - Increases knowledge
  - Potential increase in ability and motivation

Direction of Accommodation

- Accommodation direction towards white/standard
  - Philadelphia residents (Ash & Myhill 1986; Labov & Harris 1986)
  - Blacks showed more accommodation than whites
  - Sometimes in sounds (often with less contact), some in grammar (often with more contact)

- Other studies show substrate influence on superstrate
  - Lexical items
    - Camouflage terms move to mainstream; repeat.
  - Copula absence
  - Non-rhoticity (though story goes both ways over time)

- Third ethnicity
  - White: translocal identity, overt prestige (expanded identity, # contacts outside)
  - AAVE: local identity, covert prestige (local identity, # contacts inside)