Progressive –*S* Absence in African American English

African American English is a dialect of English spoken by African Americans with its own phonetic, morphological, and syntactical features. It is a valid and rule-govern language, not "broken" or "lazy" English as some may call it. One syntactical feature of AAE is the absence of *-s* in progressive verbs, found in sentences like "He talk too much" and "She buy all the clothes." This feature is attested in all regions by Rickford (1999), examples there including, "He tell me he God" (p. 237) and "His master live in a tall house," (p. 240) The former having zero-copula as well. The words "tell" and "live" in these examples would include the *-s* suffixes in Standard English. In the present study, variation across demographics was found in *-s* absence, particularly in age, class, gender, region, and education.

Methods

In a linguistics course covering African American English, students were given an online survey to share with African American English speakers. These respondents were asked demographic questions like age, gender, and region, while class was discerned from various questions such as their occupation and education levels. This was done because asking participants directly for their class is known to be unreliable. Following this, examples of various AAE features were given and respondents were given a Likert scale to find their familiarity with the features, from never having heard the feature (1) to often using it (5). These features included both known phonological variations like vowel mergers and ask-metathesis, as well as syntactical features like habitual be, completive done, and progressive -s absence. The latter was split into two questions: one that gave the example, "He talk too much" and another, "She buy all the clothes." This paper considers the first example, as more variation was found there.

Overall, 51 African Americans took part in the study. Of that, 29 (57%) (were over thirty while 22 were older. 27 (53%) were male while 24 were female. Most respondents (28, 55%)

were from southern states, while 18 were from northern states, and 5 were from other places, which includes the western states, Florida, and elsewhere in the world. Class was split evenly into working (26, 51%) and middle (25), and education included only high school (18, 35%), some college (20, 39%) and a college degree (13, 26%). A notable cross-tabulation was found in region/class numbers, with southern respondents being mostly working class while northern respondents were equally working and middle class.

Results and Discussion

Starting with age variation, significant variation was found in younger (than thirty years) and older (than thirty years) speakers in the data. Both groups indicated often hearing the feature, the absence of *–s,* at (≥3), but younger speakers were more likely to *use* it (≥4). This is notable since features used by younger speakers are often considered emergent. A counter argument would be that younger speakers may have less education and therefore this variation may be influenced by that, but at 30 most people presumably have as much education as they will ever have.

More significant variation was seen in gender. Women used the feature more often than men, though again both have reported hearing it. This relates to what Labov calls the "Gender Paradox," which says that when a form is prescribed, women will conform more than men, while in emerging features women will conform less. But since our variable conflicts with Standard English and therefore is prescribed against, our data conflicts with this notion. Further research with a larger sample would be needed to figure out the meaning of this variation.

Education, which was split between high school, some college, and college degree, showed evenly stratified variation with each higher education level using the feature less. Of all features studied, *-s* absence was the most common feature among high school graduates, and this demographic showed the strongest statistical significance. I believe this interacted with class the

most, since more education usually leads to a higher class, especially as people are now considering higher education as a class gateway rather than a knowledge pursuit.

Among all features, class was usually the greatest area of variation. There was a stark difference between middle- and working-class usage of the feature. The middle class never used a feature more than the working class, which suggests that AAE is a vernacular dialect distinct from Standard English. This also shows that *–s* absence is not a prestige feature. Wolfram (1969) showed similar variation in class, with middle class speakers using the feature at most 10% (chart below). Our results show less significant variation than that, though this is because our questions asked if respondents had *heard* the feature in addition to its use. Wolfram's study also primarily included youths in major cities, while this study has more variance in age and region.

Conclusion

In the absence of the third person singular progressive *–s* suffix, this study found significant variation in age, gender, education, and class. Our findings suggested that the feature was emergent in younger age groups and lacked prestige among education and class groups. Interestingly, the gender variation conflicted with Labov's Gender Paradox, with our study showing higher use of the feature in women despite *–s* absence despite it being prescribed against. This may suggest that the paradox doesn't hold up in data that isn't entirely based on gender. That is, it only applies when a group of men and women are given, and each have normal variation in race, class, age, etc. but not when a single race, class, or age group is singled out and then split into gender. Or, perhaps, our sample size is too small to show the underlying trend.

To improve this study, future inquiries could include more regional variation. Two-thirds of our data came from speakers in southern states and there was considerable correlation with rurality and region. Southerners were mostly rural, and northerners were mostly urban. Further,

different examples of *–s* absence than the ones given could be included to find out if there is grammatical variation in the use of this feature, especially related to aspect.

References

Rickford, J. R. (1999). *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*.

Wolfram, W. (1969). *A sociolinguistic description of Detroit Negro speech*.