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Assignment One

In his 2015 paper *The Sociolinguistic Construction of African American Language*, Walt Wolfram details the ways in which sociolinguists have created and perpetuated a sort of folklore surrounding African American Language (AAL). Wolfram argues that in linguists' attempts to combat the public myth that AAL is deficient English, they had, in turn, contributed to the creation of sociolinguistic myths about the variety. As a result of various approaches to the study of the variety, the folklore of AAL has been constructed and perpetuated over time.

One such approach to the study of AAL is characterizing the speakers of the variety. Early on, AAL research was focused on working-class populations that resided in urban, non-Southern areas– despite AAL's roots in the rural South. Linguists have described the variety to be one spoken by the majority of Black urban youth in the U.S. with a uniformity that is present throughout various parts of the country. However, this implication that AAL is homogeneous across regions is untrue. The level of variability in AAL is high due to a number of factors, including region, setting, and socioeconomic status. Since data was chiefly collected from the working-class, these factors went unaccounted for. As a result of this inequality in data collection, the myth that AAL is uniform across its speakers was borne. Moreover, something that this speakers-based approach notably lacks is a description of the features of AAL, which linguists have examined through another approach.

Linguists have attempted to characterize AAL through the description of its features. This method culminated in the construction of a sort of *ordained list* of *distinctively Black grammatical features* (DBGF) that are present in AAL, but somehow breach the rules of General American English (GAE). Such features include the *habitual be*; absence of verbal, possessive, and plural -s; omission of *copula* and *auxiliary be's*, labialization of non-initial interdental fricatives, consonant cluster reduction; and postvocalic r-lessness. However, this description of AAL is lacking in nuance, as it ignores certain *camouflaged forms* that may appear to be the same as features of GAE, but have special uses. Wolfram provides an example of a *camouflaged form*: the *indignant come*. In the sentence "He *come* asking me to do the dishes," *come* can seem like a word of GAE, but in reality it expresses indignation, or annoyance, at being asked to perform the task of washing the dishes. Such examples demonstrate a major fault of this features-based approach. By only examining the glaring examples of what would be deemed "unacceptable" in GAE, researchers will miss the more inconspicuous characteristics of AAL, or areas where it may overlap with GAE. Beyond that, this approach disregards the inner structure of AAL. Syntacticians have argued that the tense-mood-aspect (TMA) system must be viewed as a coordinated aspectual system as opposed to a list of disconnected features. Overall, the features-based approach lacks depth– ignoring more subtle attributes and the structural system of AAL by reducing it to a mere list of features. In fact, this *ordained list* of features is sometimes thought to be a removable facet of AAL users' language, leading to implications for code-switching.

Speakers of AAL are often thought to have greater capacity for code-switching than speakers from other communities, implying that shifting to GAE only requires the exclusion of AAL features from speech. This assumption is especially prevalent in educational discussions,

wherein students that use AAL are often expected to switch to GAE in classroom settings and reserve AAL usage for more "informal" contexts. However, this claim that AAL users are somehow more versatile in their ability to code-switch has not been proven through substantial evidence as findings have varied in their results. Wolfram cites a 2009 Renn and Terry study in which data from over 100 African American students comparing speech in formal versus informal contexts were collected at three points: first and second grades, sixth grade, and eighth grade. The data showed that there was no significant shifting within the first and second graders, and that by sixth and eighth grade, the children had acquired sensitivity to shifting. However, the study did also find that the participants did not fully switch between idealized AAL and idealized GAE, but rather exhibited a sort of matrix variety that depended on context. This finding suggests that speakers of AAL may be on a continuum, and counteracts with the pervasive thought that code-switching comes naturally to speakers.

The idea that AAL speakers can exist on a continuum is part of an approach to characterizing the variety through careful consideration of its systems and patterns. This method of studying AAL addresses many of the deficiencies of the other approaches, providing a more nuanced view of the variety. As opposed to broadly describing AAL through an *ordained list* of features, this approach examines the ways in which these features are systematically used: the patterns of their usage. Furthermore, features must be treated as interwoven properties that work together as part of a larger TMA system. This view represents AAL patterns as intertwined with those of GAE, examining not only the ways in which they are dissimilar, but also the areas in which the two may share similarities. In describing the interconnections between AAL and GAE, this approach may address the widespread assumption of versatility in code-switching. If it is true that AAL is indeed intertwined with GAE, then it may explain how it is unreasonable to

expect speakers to separate the features of AAL from GAE in their speech with ease. In contrast to the code-switching assumption, this approach suggests the existence of a continuum of AAL speakers. Depending on where the speaker lies on the spectrum from idealized GAE to idealized AAL, their range of access to the continuum may vary based on factors such as socioeconomic status, region, and context. The notion of a continuum also combats the myth that AAL is homogeneous, lacking variation by region or other factors. AAL is characterized by inherent variability according to this approach, taking into account demographics that include more than just the working-class when studying the variety.

Throughout his paper, Wolfram describes the ways in which sociolinguists have inadvertently developed folklore about AAL in their efforts to legitimize the variety. Some approaches to studying AAL have, at times, been oversimplistic or reductionist representations of reality. In order to combat the perpetuation of these sociolinguistic myths, scholars must think critically about "facts" that have been accepted into the canon. Linguists must take on a nuanced view of the variety, looking closely at the systems and patterns within the variety– in doing so, research will be able to expand beyond the folklore and ultimately culminate in a greater understanding of AAL.

Works Cited

Wolfram, Walt. “The Sociolinguistic Construction of African American Language.” *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, edited by Sonja Lanehart, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 338-351.