

# Local and External Language Standards in African American English

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This investigation attempts to determine the social distribution and contextual shifting of African American English (AAE) within rural Southern African American communities. The study compares selective diagnostic AAE variables and features of speech rate and pause in the speech of three recognized sociopolitical leaders in public presentations and sociolinguistic interviews. The results show that there are not significant shifts in the use of AAE from the sociolinguistic interview to the public presentation settings and that leaders do not necessarily align their speech with their age and sex cohorts in terms of vernacular AAE usage. The authors conclude that the relative autonomy of the community, its endocentric versus exocentric orientation, the primary public service constituency of the leader, the different social affiliations and divisions within the community, the speaker's personal background and history, and the socialized demands and expectations for public presentation are all factors in understanding the leaders' use of local vernacular and mainstream standard variants.

**Keywords:** *African American English; style; code switching; language variation; sociolinguistics*

African American English (AAE) has been scrutinized more extensively than any other nonmainstream variety of English in the history of American dialectology (Brasch & Brasch 1974; Schneider 1996; Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford 2004). At the same time, the descriptive focus on AAE reveals a preoccupation with basilectal versions of AAE, often to the exclusion of more acrolectal versions of this variety (Taylor 1986; Weldon 2004). As Queen and Baptista (2008:186) note, "Presenting speakers who have usage patterns that are the most distinctive from

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other varieties of American English as the most authentic speakers disenfranchises those speakers who use fewer features less frequently.” Furthermore, the obsession with the canonical vernacular forms may lead to a kind of “sociolinguistic nostalgia” for the authentic vernacular speaker as researchers overlook the range of variation within African American communities (Bucholtz 2003). Weldon (2004:3) observes that there is “a prevailing assumption among sociolinguists that African American English is not spoken regularly by middle-class African Americans” so that their speech would be of little interest to descriptions of this variety. Though there has been considerable discussion of an idealized distinction between standard and vernacular AAE (e.g., Taylor 1986; Debose 1992; Spears 1999), there has been surprisingly little empirical study of the social distribution of AAE within African American communities.

As a result of the selective description of vernacular AAE, some fundamental issues in the sociolinguistic description of AAE have persisted. For example, there is much popular and educational discussion of code switching and stylistic variation among African American speakers (e.g., Wheeler & Swords 2006) but limited empirical study of these phenomena (Debose 1992; Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994; Linnes 1998; Weldon 2004; Renn 2007). Furthermore, there are sometimes conflicting results about the range of stylistic variation manifested by African American speakers and the social factors that correlate with this variation (Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994; Cukor-Avila 1995; Charity 2003; Thompson, Craig, & Washington 2004).

Somewhat ironically, there is also a serious gap in the examination of the social stratification of AAE despite some of the early attention to language variation among different social classes of African Americans (e.g., Labov 1966; Wolfram 1969). In fact, Wolfram’s (1969) study four decades ago still stands as one of the few investigations primarily dedicated to the study of the social stratification of AAE within an African American community. The assumption that the use of AAE is primarily if not exclusively a working-class behavior is considered to be a reflection of a type of “social stratification myth” about AAE use among sociolinguists (Wolfram 2007). Debose (1992) argues that the linguistic repertoire of middle-class African Americans is best described in terms of a code-switching model whereby two coexisting, closely related, but autonomous linguistic systems operate, while Linnes (1998) suggests that AAE and Standard American English (SAE) use in the African American community represents a nascent diglossic situation whereby speakers choose more vernacular AAE related to “ethnic” themes and SAE related to “mainstream” themes.

The results of Weldon’s (2004) study of the language used by a group of accomplished, nationally recognized African Americans who were part of a State of the Black Union Symposium aired on C-SPAN is an important step in examining a more representative spectrum of language use by African Americans across social strata and in different social settings. The speakers were assembled in a church where they spoke to a dual audience—the immediate, predominantly black audience

gathered in the church and the predominantly white audience of C-SPAN viewers. Weldon's study exposes spurious dichotomies such as the nominal distinction between standard and vernacular AAE; it also raises questions about the role of personal presentation and audience in public speeches, including shifting styles, performative code switching, and the existence of fossilized vernacular forms, that is, persistent vernacular variants that are used in settings that might seem to call for variants of SAE.

The study reported here is similar to Weldon's in that it focuses on the speech of recognized leaders in the African American community. However, it is quite different in that it examines leaders within the context of their local Southern rural communities as opposed to national leaders in an imagined, supraregional African American community. It also expands the consideration of social parameters in examining shifts in vernacular use by comparing speech to public audiences with the speech of sociolinguistic interviews. It further compares the speech of these local leaders with that of their age and sex cohort groups from their local communities to determine how these community leaders match age- and sex-appropriate community norms. Our case study format limits our investigation to several representative leaders within a couple of communities. Nonetheless, it is an appropriate format through which to extend the examination of some central issues about socially based language variation within African American communities, including the role of personal presentation and audience in public speeches, style shifting, and the use of fossilized vernacular forms. The term *fossilization* is used here to refer to the habituated use of vernacular variants, especially in more formal public settings that might seem to call for more standard, mainstream variants. This use of *fossilized* seems parallel to its use in second language acquisition studies where it refers to the enduring use of interlanguage or transfer forms characteristic of adult second language learners (Selinker 1972).

The study addresses several different issues in the social diversification of AAE in African American communities. First, it considers the basis of social divisions within African American communities. Though demographically based, conventional socioeconomic indices have been shown to correlate with diagnostic AAE variables (e.g., Wolfram 1969), the Eurocentric biases of the social variables and their relative weighting (e.g., residency, occupation, income, education) raise issues about analysts' bases for social divisions in African American communities, including the need to examine localized linguistic marketplaces (Bourdieu & Boltanski 1975; D. Sankoff & Laberge 1978) in the use of AAE structures. A second issue is the range of variation exhibited by African American speakers. Do speakers switch between the use of predominant acrolectal and basilectal forms, or is there a matrix variety along the standard–nonstandard continuum that is subject to constrained stylistic variation on this axis? This issue, in turn, has implications for the idealized standard–vernacular dichotomy that is sometimes applied to language use in AAE communities.

## The Community Setting

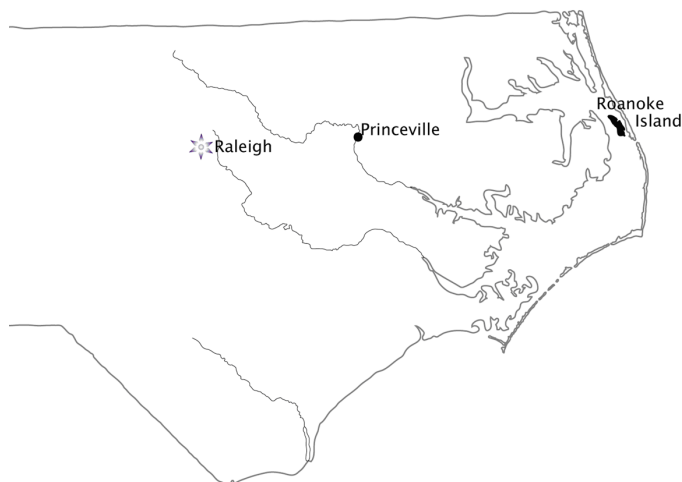
The study reported here focuses on the use of language forms by several community leaders in two small African American communities in the rural South. These situations are quite different from the situation described by Weldon (2004), where recognized national leaders spoke to large numbers of people whom they had never met personally as well as imagined audiences of TV viewers. In the small communities that we have been studying (Carpenter 2004, 2005; Rowe 2005; D'Andrea 2005; Carpenter & Hilliard 2005; Kendall 2007b), everybody generally knows everybody and knows about their background in the community, and public speaking may be much more localized in terms of speakers' relations to their audiences.

The two communities represented by the speakers in this study are Princeville, North Carolina, and Roanoke Island, North Carolina, both historically black communities that date back to the Civil War (Mobley 1994; Click 2001). Princeville, the oldest town incorporated by African Americans in the United States (Mobley 1994), has an estimated 2,000 residents (following a census recount in 2004, the population was 2,020). It was established by freed slaves after the Civil War and incorporated in 1885 (Mobley 1994). More than 98 percent of the population is African American, and it is largely self-governed by an elected mayor and Town Council, the members of which are all African Americans. In 1999, the entire town was destroyed by a flood from Hurricane Floyd, drawing national media attention. Since that time, the town has been completely rebuilt and continues to receive periodic media attention and increased contact with outsiders including a limited tourist industry. The town is approximately 100 miles from Raleigh, the capital city of North Carolina.

The Roanoke Island African American community of approximately 200 residents dates back to the Freedmen's Colony established on the island during the Civil War (Click 2001). During the Civil War, as many as 3,000 African Americans inhabited the island, but the vast majority left following the return of most of the land to white owners. However, a small number of African Americans remained, bought land, and established one part of the island as homestead for a small but stable African American community that has existed to this day. Although African Americans established their own churches, schools, and other social institutions, the community was never recognized as a separate principality. The locations of Roanoke Island and Princeville are indicated in Figure 1.

For the sake of this study, we define community leaders in terms of their administrative or official office within the community. In our initial research entrée into small, regionalized African American communities, we used a top-down fieldwork model in which we initially sought out contacts with people who served in official capacities of community leadership—for example, the mayor, commissioner, town manager, and so forth. As representative agents of the community, they lead the community in a number of official and unofficial functions, including community-internal, everyday affairs. They also often serve as community agents for outsiders

**Figure 1**  
**Map of Eastern North Carolina**



who come to the community, including sociolinguistic fieldworkers such as those from the North Carolina Language and Life Project. Briggs (1986) notes that there are typically people in fieldwork communities who assume agentive roles in interacting with outsiders, and this has certainly been the case in our studies with small rural Southern communities. In the process of networking to gain community access for conducting sociolinguistic interviews, we interviewed these leaders in ways comparable to the interviews conducted with other community participants in our studies. Meanwhile, as participant observers, fieldworkers led by Ryan Rowe (2005) often attended various community events—meetings, celebrations, and other public activities—that gave us an opportunity to record public speeches, media interviews, and other public presentations by these leaders for documentaries that we were producing with the community at the time of our research (Rowe & Grimes 2007; Sellers 2007). These data provide the basis for a study in which we compare these leaders' public speeches to their speech during sociolinguistic interviews as well as to their community cohort groups.

### **Speakers, Settings, and Language Use**

In this section, we consider three different community leaders whom we have had an occasion to record in different types of settings and with different audiences. Two

of the three leaders are from the town of Princeville and one is from Roanoke Island. First, we consider a couple of leaders from Princeville, the town's mayor and the town manager. Both the mayor and the town manager were among our initial contacts when we set up meetings to discuss our proposed sociolinguistic study (Rowe & Kendall 2004; D'Andrea 2005; Rowe 2005).

## The Mayor

We collected several recordings with the mayor of Princeville at the time of our primary sociolinguistic study from 2003 to 2005. The recordings, including a sociolinguistic interview, were conducted by two white male field workers in their mid to late twenties. The mayor, born in 1965, was the youngest of thirteen children from a family of sharecroppers. She has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in accounting and now is a social service provider and pastor. She initially served as a commissioner and then was elected the mayor of Princeville, the youngest African American female mayor in North Carolina at the time she took office. As part of her role as mayor (from 2002 to 2006), she presided at public meetings, town council meetings, and other official gatherings in Princeville. To give a sense of one of her public presentations, we provide an excerpt from her introduction of Joseph Lowery, a celebrated civil rights leader who helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Martin Luther King, Jr. The excerpt comes from the annual town birthday celebration held in a prominent Princeville church in February 2005.<sup>1</sup>

Mayor: Praise God, I won't be t- before you long, 'cause I- we want to hear from Reverend Lowery, but before we have him to come up I want to present the key to Princeville to him. Praise the Lord, we gonna spoil him while he here, he's gonna want to come back. I tol' him, I tol' him on the way here, I say, "We gonna spoil you while you here, so you gonna want to come back to the town of Princeville." First of all, I give honor to God, my Lord Jesus Christ, and we bring greetin' from the Town of Princeville and the Board of Commission. You all can stan' again. Yeah, we just want- this is honor for you, too, today.

To compare the mayor's speech in her sociolinguistic interview and public presentation, we consider a set of diagnostic AAE morphosyntactic and phonological variables for her sociolinguistic interview and her public speech. The linguistic variables examined include copula or auxiliary absence (e.g., *she nice*; *she acting nice*), verbal *-s* absence (e.g., *she go there*), plural *-s* absence (e.g., *three container*), pre-vocalic consonant cluster reduction (e.g., *wes' area*), and postvocalic *r*-lessness (*ca'* for *car*). With the possible exception of plural *-s* absence, all of these variables are widely documented structural traits of vernacular AAE (see, e.g., Rickford 1999). Plural *-s* absence not constrained by quantified measure nouns (e.g., *two pound*) is

quite limited in most vernacular varieties of AAE (Labov et al. 1968; Fasold 1972; Rickford 1999), but it is relatively robust in Princeville, reflecting somewhat of a local, regional pattern in terms of AAE (Rowe 2005). Where we have available figures, we also compare the speech in the mayor's sociolinguistic interview to the interview styles of her respective cohort age and gender group—middle-aged women from Princeville—to determine how the mayor might compare to these speakers (Rowe 2005; D'Andrea 2005). This comparison is given in Figure 2.

In the comparison, there is no appreciable difference in the use of vernacular features in the mayor's public presentation and in her sociolinguistic interview. While she shows a higher level of plural *-s* absence in her public presentation (50.0 percent vs. 31.9 percent), she has a lower incidence of third-person verbal *-s* attachment in that setting (55.6 percent vs. 94.4 percent). Overall, however, the difference in non-standard variant usage is not significant. She does, however, show a significant difference by comparison to her age and gender cohorts but not in the direction we might predict—the mayor is actually more vernacular in her speech than are her peers. We address a possible explanation for this pattern in the next section.

We also provide a comparison of the vowels produced by the mayor in these two different settings. A plot of the mayor's vowel spaces in these recordings is shown in Figure 3.<sup>2</sup>

We have examined the mayor's vowel productions with the hope of identifying other ways in which she might show stylistic difference on the two different occasions, roughly following the work of Hindle's (1980) dissertation (discussed in Labov 2001), which analyzed approximately 3,600 vowels over the course of one day with a single individual, "Carol Meyers." Meyers was recorded at her workplace, at home during dinner, and during a bridge game with friends. Hindle found that the mean formant values for these contexts differed significantly and that the social context—"office," "home," or "game"—had the strongest effect on Meyers's vowel realizations.

In the case of Princeville's mayor, we note that the mean formant values show a few differences depending on social context. In particular, her back vowels /u/ and /o/ are further back in the interview setting than they are in her public speech. The application of a *t*-test confirms that these differences along the F2 dimension are significant (/u/:  $t = 3.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ; /o/:  $t = 4.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Although less impressionistically noticeable from the plot, *t*-tests further indicate a significant difference among the mayor's vowels for the height of her /ɪ/ vowel ( $t = 3.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). So what accounts for these differences in the mayor's vowels? The more backed productions in her sociolinguistic interview appear more in line with traditional AAE vowels (Thomas 2007), possibly indicating a heightened presentation of African American identity in her interview with two white sociolinguistic fieldworkers. However, it is harder to suppose an explanation for the statistically significant difference in the height of her /ɪ/ vowel. In fact, we must ask at this point: are these differences, albeit statistically significant, perhaps sociolinguistically irrelevant, the effects of differences in the

Figure 2  
Comparison of Selected Diagnostic Variables for the Princeville Mayor

	Plural -s abs	Cop abs	3rd sg. -s abs	Pre-V CCR	Post-V r- lessness
Speech at Town Event	14/28 50.0%	6/13 (4/6 are) 46.2%	10/18 55.6%	7/9 77.8%	39/93 41.9%
Sociolinguistic Interview	30/94 31.9%	7/12 (4/4 are) 58.3%	17/18 94.4%	45/66 68.2%	51/100 51.0%
Cohort Group	68/644 10.6%	44/105 41.9%	51/101 50.5%	No data	422/800 52.8%

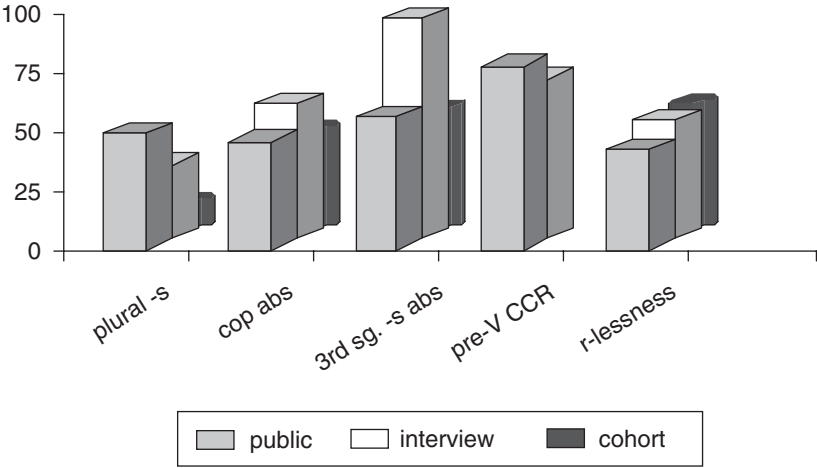
Vernacular variants: public address vs. sociolinguistic interview<sup>3</sup>

**Chi square** = 0.008 (df = 1), *p* = non-significant

Vernacular variants: mayor vs. cohort group

**Chi square** = 37.121 (df = 1), *p* < .001

**Graphic Comparison of Selected Variables**



Note: The cumulative figures used in the chi-square calculations exclude *r*-lessness for all of the speakers examined in this study because of the potential skewing of the figures. The original analysis included figures for the regularization of past tense *be* and negative concord, but there were no potential cases of these variables in the mayor's speech at the birthday celebration. In her sociolinguistic interview, fifteen of twenty-four cases of past tense *be* regularization were realized (62.5 percent) and twelve of fifteen cases of negative concord (80.0 percent) were realized. These figures are well in line with vernacular norms for these variables (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969).

Vernacular variants: Public address versus sociolinguistic interview

$\chi^2 = 0.008$  (df = 1), *p* = ns

Vernacular variants: Mayor versus cohort group

$\chi^2 = 37.121$  (df = 1), *p* < .001





**Table 1**  
**The Mayor's Speech Rate and Pause Durations in Two Settings**

	Median Speech Rate ( $\sigma/s$ )	Median Pause Duration (ms)
Speech at town event	4.65	500
Sociolinguistic interview	4.74	334
<i>t</i> -test score ( <i>t</i> )	0.71	4.49
Significance ( <i>p</i> )	>.05	<.001

The *t*-test results in Table 1 indicate that the difference between speech rate measures is not significant but that there is a significant difference in median pause durations. A possible explanation for the difference in the pause rate may be related to the presentation. The introduction at the birthday celebration is more of a deliberate speech event, in which the mayor simulates the reading of an introduction. While her diagnostic AAE variables do not seem to follow a shift to a more careful, "reading style" (Labov 1966), her pause data do.

### The Town Manager

We now consider the Princeville town manager, who was born in 1948 and was in his mid-fifties when we first started recording him. Among his administrative tasks is screening outsiders who have now "discovered" Princeville because of its historical status as the first town in the United States incorporated by blacks and the national attention it received when the town was devastated by the floodwaters created by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The national media covered the flood for days and the media have continued to document the town's miraculous recovery. In the process, a once-invisible small rural black town has taken on a celebrity-like status that now includes tours of the town and regular visits from curious outsiders, political leaders, and the press—to say nothing of visits from friendly sociolinguists in search of interviews and other sociolinguistic data.

The town manager was raised on a farm right outside of Princeville, the son of sharecroppers who farmed for a living. After graduating from high school, he became a police officer, then joined the military and earned bachelor's and master's degrees during his service career, returning to the community after his retirement from the military. In an important sense, he is a spokesperson for the community since he is an initial point of contact and often is called on to speak on behalf of the community. He was originally interviewed, by the same fieldworkers who interviewed the mayor, as part of our sociolinguistic survey. We also recorded a 2005 radio interview with him by a statewide National Public Radio affiliate station in North Carolina for a program called "The State of Things," a popular talk show aired throughout North Carolina, which was hosted by a well-known middle-aged white male. A brief transcript of an excerpt from his radio interview is given below.

Radio Host: In 1999 a railroad crossing cut into the dike was an area of vulnerability to flooding. Does the new dike have a rail crossing cut into it?

Town Manager: It have a rail crossin' cuttin' in- in there but if the raise- th- the different between the dike and the rail crossin' and also, uh, since the dike had been built they also, uh, did, uh, Highway 64 goin' east and west. And that cut into the dike and that was never repaired to keep water from comin' in. Those area have been, uh, taken care of and once the water get to a certain level that our emergency management team feel as if- it's at a certain height, they are authorized then to notify the railroads that they would have stop the trains from comin' through there and they would block it up. We have, uh, metal container that we put there to block it up to make it- bring it to the same height as the dike.

As we have done in the analysis of the Princeville mayor, we now consider several generally recognized features of vernacular AAE in these two types of interviews. We also consider his speech in the sociolinguistic interview in relation to his cohort group in Princeville—older, African American men (Rowe 2005; D'Andrea 2005). This comparison is shown in Figure 4.

As we found for the mayor, there is not a significant difference in the use of vernacular forms in the town manager's radio broadcast and in the sociolinguistic interview, indicating that he did not shift vernacular use for the broadcast—despite the fact that this was a broadcast publicly aired throughout the state. Plural absence, third-person verbal *-s* absence, and prevocalic consonant cluster reduction occur in roughly equal proportions in both contexts, with 16.7 percent plural *-s* absence in the radio interview and 19.8 percent in the sociolinguistic interview, 62.5 percent verbal *-s* absence to 60.0 percent, and 45.5 percent consonant cluster reduction to 52.6 percent. *r*-less realizations (61.7 percent) and copula absence (55.6 percent) are actually more frequent in the radio interview compared to the sociolinguistic interview (46.0 percent and 22.6 percent, respectively), though the tokens for copula absence are somewhat limited. The manager's speech aligns overall with his cohort age group of speakers, although there is some fluctuation in terms of particular features. Whatever the reason—the fossilized entrenchment of vernacular forms or a deliberate choice—he does not significantly shift his use of primary vernacular forms based on the broad-based radio audience. This matches our observations of his speech behavior in numerous situations, both public and nonpublic, through several years of interaction.

We have also conducted an acoustic study of the town manager's vowel space in his radio interview compared to his sociolinguistic interview to determine if his vowel system shifts during these two occasions. A plot of the two vowel spaces is provided in Figure 5.

The manager's vowel distribution seems to be closely aligned in both settings, though the sociolinguistic interview shows a slightly more fronted and slightly larger overall vowel space than the radio interview. The greater distance in the /æ/ production from the /ɛ/ production in the radio interview indicates a production somewhat

Figure 4  
Comparison of Selected Diagnostic Variables  
for the Princeville Town Manager

	Plural <i>-s</i> abs	Cop abs	3rd sg. <i>-s</i> abs	Pre-V CCR	Post-V <i>r-</i> lessness
Radio Interview	4/24 16.7%	5/9 (4/7 <i>are</i> ) 55.6%	10/16 62.5%	5/11 45.5%	42/68 61.7%
Sociolinguistic Interview	19/96 19.8%	7/31 (3/7 <i>are</i> ) 22.6%	6/10 60.0%	30/57 52.6%	46/100 46.0%
Cohort Group	35/290 12.1%	44/86 51.2%	19/81 23.5%	No data	182/300 60.7%

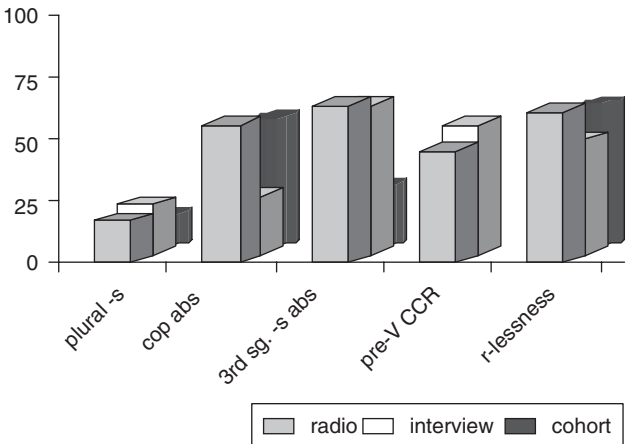
Vernacular variants: radio interview vs. sociolinguistic interview<sup>5</sup>

**Chi square** = 0.402 (df = 1), *p* = non-significant

Vernacular variants: town manager vs. cohort group

**Chi square** = 0.226 (df = 1), *p* = non-significant

**Graphic Comparison of Selected Variables**



Note: As with the mayor, the original analysis of the town manager included figures for past tense *be* regularization and negative concord. In the radio interview five of seven (71.4 percent) potential cases of past tense regularized *be* were realized, and in the interview twenty-six of thirty-six (72.2 percent) cases were realized. One of three potential cases of negative concord was realized in his radio interview, and two of three cases were realized in his sociolinguistic interview.

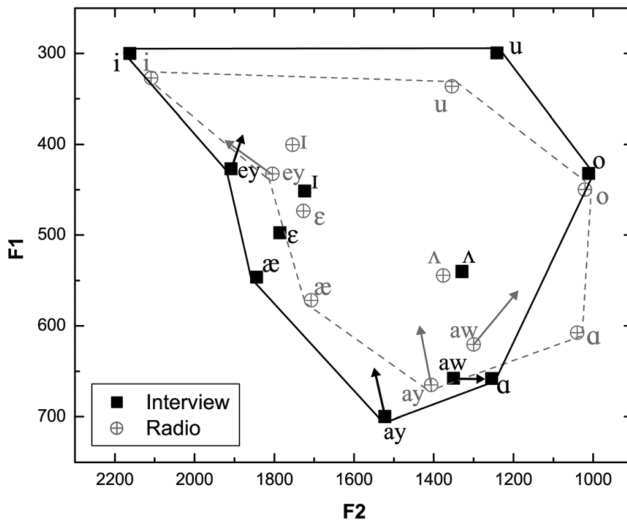
Vernacular variants: Radio interview versus sociolinguistic interview

$\chi^2 = 0.402$  (df = 1), *p* = *ns*

Vernacular variants: Town manager versus cohort group

$\chi^2 = 0.226$  (df = 1), *p* = *ns*

**Figure 5**  
**Vowel Plot for the Princeville Town Manager**



less associated with the more raised, AAE production of the /æ/ vowel (Grimes 2005; Thomas 2007). A *t*-test confirms that the manager's /æ/ productions are significantly different between the two settings, though only in the F2 dimension ( $t = 2.47, p < .05$ ). The manager's /a/ vowel is higher (though not statistically significantly) and further back ( $t = 2.60, p < .05$ ) in the radio interview than in the sociolinguistic interview, and, as for the mayor, the height of the /ɪ/ vowel is significantly different in the two settings ( $t = 3.04, p < .05$ ), but his other vowels do not show statistically significant shifts. With these few exceptions, which again may simply be the results of differences in the phonetic or acoustic environments, the vocalic data thus align overall with the data on diagnostic AAE variables that do not show significant shifts in his public speech and sociolinguistic interview.

The comparison of the town manager's speech rate and pause duration is given in Table 2, following the same format used for the mayor of Princeville. Though the manager has a shorter median pause duration in the radio interview than in the sociolinguistic interview, there are no significant differences in his pause or speech rates for the two types of speech events. This finding seems to coincide with the results of our other analyses, indicating that the town manager does not appear to shift his speech significantly from one situation to another.

For the two Princeville leaders, the comparison of vernacular forms, vowel realizations, and speech rate and pause data in addressing public audiences of different

**Table 2**  
**The Town Manager's Speech Rate and Pause Durations in Two Settings**

	Median Speech Rate ( $\sigma/s$ )	Median Pause Duration (ms)
Radio interview	5.34	300
Sociolinguistic interview	5.27	322
<i>t</i> -test score ( <i>t</i> )	0.79	1.85
Significance ( <i>p</i> )	>.05	>.05

types—the mayor to a predominantly African American audience and the town manager to a heterogeneous but predominantly European American audience of listeners for the National Public Radio show—does not show an overall significant shift in language use.

### The County Commissioner

As a final comparison, we consider the case of a Dare County commissioner from Roanoke Island, the small Outer Banks African American community studied by a North Carolina State University research team (Carpenter 2004, 2005; Carpenter & Hilliard 2005; Vadnais 2006) from 2003 to 2007. The commissioner is the first and only African American commissioner elected to this office in Dare County, a largely European American population (94.7 percent white and 2.7 percent African American in the 2000 census) of approximately 30,000 residents encompassing the northern Outer Banks. The commissioner lives on Roanoke Island, in the county seat, Manteo, which is the home of the small African American community. She was born and raised on the island where her father and grandfather worked in the marine industry; her family lineage dates from Freedmen's Colony of Roanoke Island. Like the town leaders in Princeville, she has bachelor's and master's degrees, so her level of education is comparable to theirs. However, her training is in education, and she has taught elementary school and served on the Board of Education for two decades, including service as the chair of the board. She also served as an assistant dean at a local community college.

We provide an excerpt from a 2005 speech commemorating the Freedman's Colony established on Roanoke Island during the Civil War. The speech was given to a mixed but majority European American audience in attendance at the celebration.

County Commissioner: So it's only fittin' that the Freedmen's history that began here on Roanoke Island story be told and I'm going to share that with you. Many of you are certainly familiar with the Elizabethan heritage of Roanoke Island, Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony. We all know that the island was settled, uh, in 1587 and then that colony mysteriously disappeared. But far few people- fewer people are aware of Roanoke Island's Freedman's Colony and the role my ancestors and my family and friends' ancestors played during the Civil War.

**Table 3**  
**The Commissioner's Speech Rate and Pause Durations in Two Settings**

	Median Speech Rate ( $\sigma/s$ )	Median Pause Duration (ms)
Public address	3.35	454
Sociolinguistic interview	3.92	371
<i>t</i> -test score ( <i>t</i> )	4.49	0.55
Significance ( <i>p</i> )	<.01	>.05

Some of the same morphosyntactic and phonological features examined for Princeville AAE are analyzed, with one difference. Instead of general plural *-s* absence, a somewhat local feature of the AAE community in Princeville, we have tabulated the occurrence of static locative *to* (e.g., *She's to the house now* for *She's at the house now*), a diagnostic dialect variant in Outer Banks speech (Vadnais 2006).

As with the town manager and mayor in Princeville, we compare the commissioner's public speech to her sociolinguistic interview, conducted in 2003 by two white female fieldworkers in their mid-twenties. As before, we also compare her speech to that of her cohort group, in this case older African American women from Roanoke Island (Carpenter 2004, 2005). This comparison is given in Figure 6.

As with the other speakers, the commissioner's sociolinguistic interview and public speech do not show a significant difference in terms of the diagnostic AAE features or the Outer Banks feature of static locative *to*. For example, her public address obtained 9.1 percent copula absence, 0.0 percent third singular verbal *-s* absence, and 32.6 percent consonant cluster reduction, compared to 0.0 percent, 5.6 percent, and 21.3 percent, respectively, for her sociolinguistic interview. We thus see that all three leaders in this study do not show a dramatic shift from public speech to the speech within their sociolinguistic interviews. In terms of her cohorts, the commissioner differs from their use of nonstandard forms, but, differently from the mayor of Princeville, the commissioner uses significantly fewer vernacular structures than do her cohorts—the opposite of the Princeville mayor, who uses more vernacular features.

Table 3 compares speech rate and the pause duration data for the commissioner in the public presentation and her sociolinguistic interview, as we have done for the speakers from Princeville. The application of *t*-tests to these data indicates that there is a significant difference in her speech rate for the two events but not in her pause durations, despite the difference in the medians. The difference in speech rate might be attributed to the context of the public event, where the commissioner gave her speech over the background of a guitar soloist. She appears to adopt the cadence of the guitar playing, with her timing adjusted to the rhythm of the music.

Figure 6  
Comparison of Selected Diagnostic Variables  
for the Dare County Commissioner

	Static loc. to	Cop abs	3rd sg. -s abs	Past tense be Reg.	Pre-V CCR	Post-V r- lessness
Public Address	1/8 12.5%	1/11 (1/9 are) 9.1%	0/7 0.0%	3/41 7.3%	15/46 32.6%	4/141 2.8%
Sociolinguistic Interview	2/11 18.2%	0/27 (0/10 are) 0.0%	1/18 5.6%	4/35 11.4%	10/47 21.3%	6/171 3.5%
Cohort Group	11/31 35.5%	32/172 (30/61 are) 18.6%	12/75 16.0%	17/103 16.5%	38/104 36.5%	122/655 18.6%

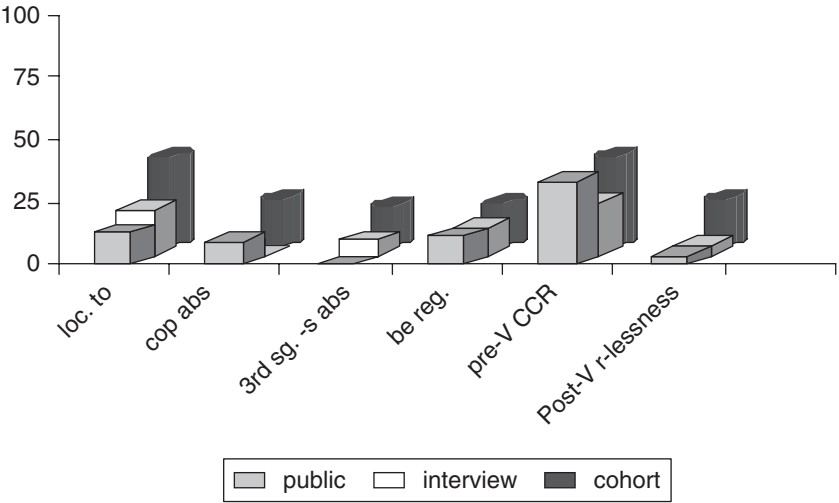
Vernacular variants: public address vs. sociolinguistic interview

Chi square = 0.111 (df = 1); *p* = non-significant

Vernacular variants: commissioner vs. cohort group

Chi square = 7.107 (df = 1); *p* < .01

Graphic Comparison of Selected Variables



Vernacular variants: Public address versus sociolinguistic interview

$\chi^2 = 0.111$  (*df* = 1), *p* = *ns*

Vernacular variants: Commissioner versus cohort group

$\chi^2 = 7.107$  (*df* = 1), *p* < .01



## Profiling Leaders' Speech

For all three of these speakers, we see important similarities and differences in the comparison of public presentations with sociolinguistic interviews. None of the speakers shows overall substantial style shifting between the sociolinguistic interviews and the public speaking presentations. The three speakers show the full range of options in the use of vernacular structures in relation to their respective cohort groups, including parallel alignment, significantly less, and significantly more vernacular use. By the same token, one of the speakers shows a difference in pause duration for the two events, and one of the speakers shows a difference in speech rate. These timing data likely indicate degrees of adjustment by the speakers toward the differences between their speech situations, especially in relation to planning their speech. The town manager, though aware of a statewide audience for his radio interview, was clearly not reading anything, and it seems unlikely that his talk was planned. On the other hand, even if the mayor and the commissioner did not "read" their speeches, they had preplanned them, so that a more deliberate style with longer pauses and/or slower speech rates might be appropriate. While the planned speech might result in a change in pause duration or timing, it does not coincide with significant shifts in the use of vernacular features.

The results of this analysis seem to contradict those of the traditional correlation studies that indicate that diagnostic linguistic variables shift along a formal–informal continuum (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1974). In fact, the speakers examined here appear to indicate that individual variables and speech features can vary in independent ways and seemingly along multiple dimensions. While it is not necessarily clear how a formal–informal continuum would map onto the speech events examined here (i.e., Is a sociolinguistic interview with white male fieldworkers more or less formal an event for the mayor than introducing a well-known civil rights leader to her small local constituency in a familiar community setting?), it is clear that the linguistic data themselves do not point to an ordered hierarchy where the speakers unilaterally adjust their speech in predictable or even post hoc interpretable ways. However we characterize the formality of the speech events, there is no evidence here that these three speakers adopt different overall speech styles according to the distinction between their sociolinguistic interviews and their more public presentations. For example, the town manager does not appear to adjust his AAE use for a radio audience that is traditionally considered to be middle class and to be predominantly white, the mayor does not seem to shift her use for an exclusively black local audience, and neither does the commissioner for a mixed but majority white local audience.

## Explaining Sociolinguistic Diversity in Community Leaders

How can we explain the differences and similarities in the three community leaders described in the previous section? Given the limitations of the case study format,

how might the study inform a more general understanding of sociolinguistic principles related to AAE use, local social practices, style shifting, and the linguistic marketplace? We now return to the questions we set forth earlier in terms of understanding local social categories and distinctions that might correlate with vernacular AAE use, the level of AAE use exhibited by socially recognized local leaders, the possible fossilization or entrenchment of a matrix of AAE features, and the extent of variation in different contextual settings.

As noted, the three community leaders are similar in terms of demographic socioeconomic variables such as level of education, occupation, and residency within their respective African American communities. They all reside in relatively modest homes embedded within the African American community, and their family heritages are deeply rooted in the local community. Notwithstanding their demographic parallels, we need to extend beyond these traditional socioeconomic factors in explaining some of the similarities and differences among speakers. To do so, we appeal here to the notions of linguistic habitus and linguistic market as set forth in Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975) and in Bourdieu (1991). Bourdieu (1991:37) notes,

On one hand, there are the socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus, which imply a certain propensity to speak and to say determinate things (the expressive interest) and a certain capacity to speak, which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation. On the other hand, there are the structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorship.

*Habitus* refers to a system of transposable dispositions, determined by a set of structural conditions (family, social stratification, community norms, etc.), that provide and constrain the practical skills available to navigate and negotiate external conditions or “fields” encountered by an individual. These fields compose the multiplex *linguistic market*, through which specific language forms gain or are assessed in terms of specific capital.

The notion of linguistic marketplace has traditionally been invoked in sociolinguistics to refer to the use of more standard variants in terms of an economically based mainstream market system (D. Sankoff & Laberge 1978; Chambers 2003). For example, because of differentially ascribed language guardian roles, teachers and authors have more value placed on their language use than do chemists or engineers; because of higher levels of public interaction, receptionists have more value placed on their language than do fulfillment clerks. In practice, this has been operationalized in the form of more robust, locally sensitive socioeconomic indices for the correlation of linguistic variables with the social “facts” of their speakers (D. Sankoff & Laberge 1978; G. Sankoff & Thibault 1980; King & Nadasdi 1996; Chambers 2003). These studies have shown the effectiveness of locally based conceptions of market-based

pressures in quantitative studies but have typically considered markets as organized on a continuum from mainstream to local. That is, the notion of market—although considered multidimensional and politically, socially, and culturally variable—has tended to be applied from a top-down perspective.

Bourdieu (1991) includes in his discussion the notion of linguistic capital in terms of “nonstandard” forms and local or “nonmainstream” markets, and this construct, at the qualitative level that we invoke here, seems as readily applicable to fully locally defined symbolic capital as it is to top-down, “mainstream-centric” conceptions of the market. Accordingly, it seems that the notion of linguistic market should not be restricted to mainstream norms and standard variants when both overt and covert prestige norms may compose the local market in a given community (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972). Bourdieu (1991:68) cites the case of the Béarnais mayor, who is praised by the local paper and gains “profit” for “condescending” to use the local dialect over Standard French in a public announcement. Our evidence here, however, suggests that these leaders adhere primarily to localized markets and are less concerned with larger scale or mainstream pressures. The town manager, for example, apparently makes no accommodating moves to the more mainstream audience of National Public Radio listeners. In fact, considering the manager further, we can understand his language use as being both constrained by *habitus*—he does not appear to have access to a more standard linguistic repertoire—and oriented entirely toward an endocentric market, despite the fact that his life history (e.g., his years in the military) may have provided him experiences with other and standard markets. As Bourdieu (1991:69) explains,

The relations of power that obtain in the linguistic market, and whose variations determine the variations in the price that the same discourse may receive on different markets, are manifested and realized in the fact that certain agents are incapable of applying to the linguistics products offered, either by themselves or others, the criteria that are most favourable to their own products.

Arising from our consideration of the manager, and the other two leaders in this study, is a focus on just what constitutes “favorability.” We see here support for a conception of local that is not always in opposition to “mainstream” or “nation.”

One of the major results from these case studies is the apparent lack of shifting that takes place on the basis of the different situational contexts, though there are shifts in pause and speech rate in terms of planned speech to a public audience vis-à-vis sociolinguistic interviews in a couple of cases. The diagnostic linguistic variables of AAE, however, do not show a shift based on differences in audiences that extend from a broadcast radio interview to an interview with sociolinguists in a familiar local setting. This seems to be a notable contrast to the descriptions in the traditional stylistic literature that show shift based on context. There are, of course, currently a number of possible explanations for such situation-based variation (e.g., Labov

1966; Bell 1984; Coupland 2001, 2007). Though we might find that other sociolinguistic variables not considered here might be more sensitive to stylistic shifting, the subset of variables chosen is among those that demonstrate significant variation based on different situational contexts (e.g., Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994). It may be the case that speakers have chosen a matrix variety in terms of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) "acts of identity" framework and simply remained faithful to that choice in a variety of situations. In addition, there may be social conditions found in these communities or sociopsychological attributes of these speakers that ameliorate the need for or desire to shift. The findings of this study differ from other traditional sociolinguistic descriptions that consider style in that we need to explain why speakers might *not* shift their dialect features in different contexts, as opposed to offering an underlying explanation for situationally based shifts in dialect features. Some possible explanations for this apparent lack of shifting are offered in the following section.

## Conclusion

Several conclusions about AAE use emerge from this comparative case study. First of all, community leaders in these rural Southern communities may show a range of vernacular use, from the primary use of a core vernacular variety to the primary use of a standard-based variety. Given the comparable socioeconomic backgrounds of the speakers, this observation certainly supports the validity of Weldon's (2004:3) challenge to the assumption that "African American English is not spoken regularly by middle-class African Americans." In fact, the range of AAE use crosses the idealized, demographically based class stratification model, and our results argue for the examination of individuals as members of social groups. In the tradition of the study of Nathan B (Labov 1966), an apparent "exception" to the norms of his group, as well as the portraits of individual leaders of sound change presented in Labov's (2001) study of social factors in change, there is as much to learn from the cases of these individual speakers as there is from the correlation-based studies of aggregate group behavior in the search to understand the full possibilities of and constraints on linguistic variation (Johnstone 1996).

We have noted that the speech of local leaders does not necessarily conform to community-based age and gender norms but that it may deviate in different ways for different speakers. For example, the Princeville mayor is among the most vernacular speakers in terms of the diagnostic variables we have examined for the town of Princeville (Rowe & Kendall 2004; D'Andrea 2005; Rowe 2005), and the Dare County commissioner in Roanoke Island is among the most standard speakers in her sex and age cohort group (Carpenter 2004, 2005). Again, this exposes the limitations of aggregate, correlational studies that do not consider individuals apart from groups. We need to examine individuals in relation to their cohort groups as well as

their role within the community. Why would a community leader use more or less vernacular norms in relation to his or her cohorts? How do we explain such deviations in terms of the speaker's status, backgrounds, and roles within and outside the community? Part of our explanation has to take into account the nature of the community itself, the nature of the leadership role, the nature of constituencies served in this capacity, and the entrenchment of structural AAE structures, that is, the relationship between *habitus* and the locally relevant linguistic market(s).

In Princeville, the mayor's and town manager's first order of public service is centered in the local citizens of a predominantly black principality that is obviously tolerant of local vernacular speech. In fact, we may hypothesize that vernacularity serves to establish solidarity with local community members. For example, the mayor's introduction of a noted civil rights advocate at the celebration is given to a near-exclusive African American audience in a church in which the majority of the audience might be presumed to be speakers of AAE. The historical values of Princeville are largely endocentric (Mobley 1994; Rowe 2005; Kendall 2007b), and most of the public speaking still occurs within the local, largely autonomous community setting. The visibility of Princeville largely emerged after the flood of 1999, and the town itself was recognized as the "oldest town chartered by blacks" only in the mid-1980s following some historical research (Mobley 1994). As the town manager noted on our first visit in 2003, until the flood, Princeville was invisible to the outside world. Accordingly, the inclusion of a wider, mainstream audience for the people of Princeville—such as the listeners to public radio—is still the exception and a relatively recent development. It is clear that the use of vernacular AAE hardly precludes anyone from public service, social prominence within the community, and apparent esteem and respect from community members.

On the other hand, the constituency of the Dare County commissioner from Roanoke Island is largely external to the African American community—and has been for decades now given her role as a pioneering leader in a dominant white social order. Even the audience at the Freedman's Colony celebration—a celebration held during Black History month to commemorate a historical black community—was predominantly white, and leaders in the African American community often lament the apparent lack of community interest in celebrating African American heritage. Furthermore, the commissioner could not win any elected office without a significant white vote since the African American population of Dare County composes less than 3 percent of the total population. By contrast, there is no white vote to speak of in Princeville. The African American community of Princeville is self-governed and largely self-sufficient, but the community on Roanoke Island is dependent politically and economically on the larger white population that surrounds it. The differential contexts and constituencies of Princeville and Roanoke Island thus correlate with the use of vernacular forms by their respective community leaders in a way that reflects the political contexts of the respective communities.

With respect to the different contexts and audiences for speech, we do not find “code switching” across contexts, that is, discrete shifts in sets of diagnostic features of AAE and SAE. Although there is some variation, there are no distinct shifts that indicate a transformation from the predominant use of vernacular to standard forms, or the converse. In fact, there is only limited variation in particular variants across the different speech events by these speakers. It appears that speakers have a matrix variety along the standard–vernacular continuum that may be shifted somewhat but is not fundamentally altered in terms of a core system. For example, when the town manger is interviewed on National Public Radio, he continues to use significant levels of vernacular AAE variants in his responses to the radio host, including plural *-s* absence (four out of twenty-four, 16.7 percent), third sg. *-s* absence (ten out of sixteen, 62.5 percent), and past tense *be* regularization (five out of seven, 71.4 percent); all of these levels are well within the normative frequency levels of usage reported for vernacular AAE (e.g., Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Fasold 1972). This lack of significant shifting suggests that these structures are a part of a core vernacular variety that seems immune to code switching. In effect, there is a default or “matrix” variety (Myers-Scotton 1998) that may show some sensitivity to stylistic shifting or may even be switched from momentarily for performative effect (Schilling-Estes 1998), but there is no indication of coexisting dialect codes that can be readily accessed by the speakers. More broadly, from several years of regular interaction and observation with these speakers by North Carolina Language and Life Project fieldworkers, we have no evidence that the town manager and mayor make a practice of switching to a primarily normative mainstream variety.

Finally, we cannot ignore some of the personal background history of the speakers we have profiled in this study to explain some of their speech behavior. The two leaders from Princeville were socialized in rural farming contexts, whereas the leader in Roanoke Island, raised in a family centered on fishing and the marine industry, was an educator who taught school and had a career in education. As demonstrated by Rowe (2005), the distinction between educators and sharecroppers in rural Southern black speech communities is probably a long-standing basis for a social distinction that correlates more with language usage than traditional, demographic socioeconomic status variables such as level of education, residency, and so forth (Labov 1966; Wolfram 1969). The mainstream linguistic market as interpreted by D. Sankoff and Laberge (1978) would thus be appropriately applied to the Dare County commissioner since educators would be ascribed a guardian language role that includes the promotion of mainstream language norms. On the other hand, an accountant or service provider and a policeman or military officer would not be subject to the same mainstream language expectations. We see, then, that there are different outcomes based on different linguistic markets and that the mainstream linguistic market may at times clash with the local linguistic market of an endocentric, traditional African American community. Furthermore, it appears that at times

the local market can entirely trump the broader mainstream market—such as indicated by the town manager of Princeville’s radio interview.

In conclusion, we observe that a variety of community, social, contextual, and personal factors have to be taken into account in understanding the public and non-public speech of community leaders in the rural African American South—and probably everywhere, for that matter. The relative autonomy of a community, the primary public service constituency, the different social affiliations and divisions within the community, speakers’ personal background and history, socialized demands and expectations for public presentation, and localized linguistic markets all seem to be factors in understanding the use of local vernacular and mainstream standard variants by these speakers. Furthermore, in terms of the linguistic codes, the study suggests a matrix variety along a standard–vernacular continuum that does not show code switching between predominantly standard mainstream and local vernacular norms. If nothing else, imagined dichotomies, unilateral explanations, and simplistic assumptions must be abandoned as we strive to understand why community leaders—and all individuals—speak the way they do in public, in sociolinguistic interviews, and in their various other settings.

## Notes

1. The excerpt transcripts are presented in standard-like orthography, though they attempt to indicate salient aspects of the speakers’ morphosyntax and phonology. Of course, the transcripts do not accurately reflect the full range of linguistic variants used by the speakers.

2. All acoustic measurements for the mayor and the town manager were taken using Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2008) on recordings digitized and stored in the Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project (Kendall 2007a, 2009). Following common sociophonetic practice (see, e.g., Thomas 2001), measurements for monophthongs were taken at the midpoint of the vowel; in the case of diphthongs, two measurements were made 30 ms from the onset and offset of the vowel. For each vowel, means were generated from the individual values for the first and second formants (F1 and F2). The number and type of vowels analyzed here were limited by the shorter recordings—the speech by the mayor and the radio interview by the manager. We analyzed only those vowels for which we could obtain comparable vowels and phonetic environments for both settings for both speakers. Only stressed vowels were measured and all pre-/l/, pre-/r/, and prenasal tokens were excluded from analysis. We have not conducted an acoustic analysis of the commissioner’s speech because the musical accompaniment to her public speech made obtaining enough accurate vowel measurements from that setting impossible.

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